

# Dyadic Religious-Spiritual Process in Christian Couples

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BOSTON COLLEGE  
Graduate School of Social Work

DYADIC RELIGIOUS-SPIRITUAL PROCESS IN CHRISTIAN COUPLES

A dissertation  
by

JACQUELINE TANIA DYER

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

April, 2010

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## **Abstract**

Eight African American Protestant Christian couples in a healthy relationship participated in a mixed methods study seeking to learn how married Protestant Christian couples use their faith dyadically to address stress and relational discord. Themes were generated from the qualitative data and reinforced or extended by the quantitative data. Findings revealed that sacred process is involved directly and indirectly in the interactional processes and relationship functions of couples with healthy relationships. The process contained pervasive active and receptive elements throughout their relationships during peaceful and stress-filled times. Findings also identify uses of silence and separation as frequent de-escalation strategies; faith-based strategies and faith-informed secular strategies for reconciliation; uses of the marital triad in a healthy marriage. Additionally undervalued community gendered politics were identified, as well as novel perspectives on cultural and community factors that may contribute to domestic violence.

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to acknowledge and thank my parents Monica and Charles Dyer. Without their help and support I would not have been able to complete this degree. I watch you both grow in your own marital triad, both of you and God, even after almost 50 years of marriage. You inspire me.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents and to my mother's mother, Gwendolyn.

I also thank my uncles Eric-Rudolph and Keith, and my aunts Avril and Joyce for their many prayers and words of encouragement.

I acknowledge and thank Reverend Viola Morris-Buchanan for her mentoring and sisterhood.

Ava 'Flava' Townsend and Jennifer Shepard Payne thanks for your partnership and for walking with me. You are all God's blessings to me.

I thank the couples who participated and who became co-creators with me in the process of documenting that which we do.

My committee members Kevin Mahoney, Ph. D., Chair, Sandy Mott, Ph. D., and Karen Kayser, Ph. D., I am grateful for your invaluable guidance and review of my dissertation.

Elaine Pinderhughes, thank you for your supporting conversations and for your efforts that made the Elaine Pinderhughes Scholarship possible which helped me to finish my academic process.

I am also grateful for the Minority Fellows Program (MFP) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) which provided a scholarship and additional mentoring.

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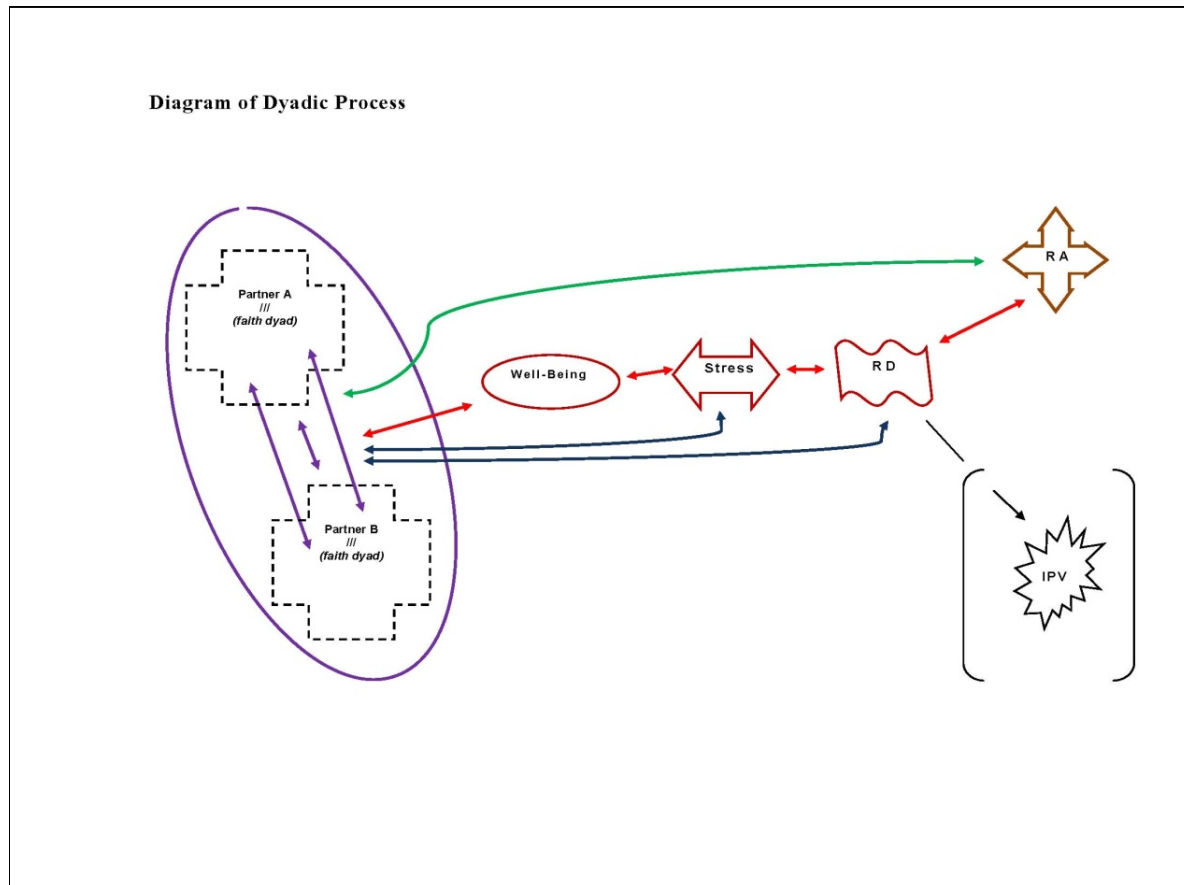
## **Chapter 1 ---- Research Focus and Aims**

### **Statement of the Research Focus and Specific Aims**

This study explores the religious and spiritual practices of African American couples as these practices affect stress and relational discord (RD). The experience being explored is how these spouses and their partners use their faith together to address relational discord. For purposes of this study, couples who had not experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) and who were considered relatively satisfied with their relationship were invited to participate in this study. The data gathered from interviews with these couples will facilitate an in-depth understanding of their mutual religious/spiritual interactions and the role these play during times of relational discord. It is possible that there may be something about the dyadic implementation of their beliefs that may distinguish a healthy religious couple from one where IPV is experienced.

The lived religious beliefs of Protestant Christian African American couples are considered to be the ways in which they use “the sacred.” The sacred is what Christians call “holy” according to their beliefs, which includes the institution of marriage. This study explored how Protestant Christian beliefs manifest in the dyadic partner process of this group, especially when experiencing RD. This dyadic religious process, whether intuitive or deliberate, may have a cascade influence first on the sense of well being, and subsequently the couple’s experience of stress (Figure A).

**Figure A: Dyadic process model**



**Legend for Model:**

- The dotted crosses represent the marital partners, permeable boundaries for dyadic interaction
- RD = Relational Discord
- RA = Relational Accord
- IPV = Intimate Partner Violence (an end path for undisrupted and escalated RD; not explored in this research)

As a first step, this research identified relatively healthy couples who were not experiencing RD, to understand the phenomenon of how their lived religious process as expressed dyadically,

affected stress and RD. This reflects an approach which is both strengths-based and contextual. Following, is a discussion of the practice rationale for this proposed research.

### **Practice rationale for research choice**

While 12.4 percent of the American population identifies as African American ("U. S. Census," 2007), almost two thirds of this group [or about seven percent of Americans] are affiliated with historically African American churches ("U. S. Religious Landscape Survey," 2008). Religious belief influences a large portion of this population. It played and continues to play important critical roles in the endurance of the African American community. Religious belief is also known to have salutary effects for almost any category one can identify, including mental and physical health, and emotional and interactional well-being (Flannelly, Ellison, & Strock, 2004; Levin & Chatters, 1998). As such religious belief, also simply referred to in this paper as 'religion,' can be seen as a strength-based resource in this population. However, the African American community also contains a number of societal risk factors for domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 2007, 2009; Jordan, 2005). Very little is known about the dyadic process of African American couples regarding their faith beliefs and how these beliefs contribute to addressing their stress and couple conflicts, which ultimately may contribute to the presence or absence of IPV. In the African American community, numerous studies acknowledge the importance of religion including Taylor et al (2000), Bent-Goodley & Fowler (2006), Collins & Moore (2006) and Utsey (2008). African Americans engage in more religious practice and organizations than other groups (Chatters & Taylor, 2003; Jang & Johnson, 2004); are more likely to use religious coping than White Americans/other ethnic groups (J. A. Brown, 2004; Gottlieb & Olfson, 1987); and seem to prefer faith-based organizations to address mental health issues (J. A. Brown, 2004; R. J. Taylor, et al., 2000; Wuthnow, Hackett, & Hsu, 2004).

But this community also contains many societal stressors that negatively effects relationships potentially leading to IPV, such as financial and health deficits, as well as disparities in access to supportive services, (Jalata, 2002; Jordan, 2005; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Utsey, et al., 2008; Waltermaurer, Watson, & McNutt, 2006).

Culturally sensitive practice and research is needed in African American communities. This study stems from recognition of the importance of developing effective interventions that are sensitive for couples in the African American community both to their ethnicity and to their religious worldview. Further, the findings of this culturally sensitive research may facilitate better understanding of the protective effects of dyadic religious process and its deterrence to IPV. The knowledge gained can then be applied to professional interventions used in community agencies, by those professionals working in or partnering with religious institutions, such as African American churches.

Acquiring knowledge about the couple's "dyadic faith process" may in turn inform social workers about the best practices in working with religious African American couples. Faith-related support can then be effectively implemented from a strengths perspective by secular service providers who will be able to use this knowledge about the dyadic faith process in assisting couples in conflict resolution. Intervention and support services will be better received when tailored to the couples, thereby increasing the likelihood of more successful outcomes for at-risk members of this community. The faith-related information will contribute to the development of future research designed to investigate the spiritual mechanisms at work for religious couples and the relationship of such dynamics with IPV. Knowledge of the stressors upon the African American community and of the importance of religion within this community

elevates the importance of developing interventions in the African American community sensitive both to their culture and to their religious worldview, as the literature demonstrates.

### **Literature Review**

This review of the literature examines the various concepts utilized to this research. The definition of partner violence and its prevalence in the African American community is discussed. The factors contributing to partner violence and vulnerability of the African American community to IPV are addressed. The Womanist approach as it applies to this research will also be discussed. The remainder of the review addresses religion, the issues of religious belief generally and as connected to conflict in couples and its context for this study. The review closes with a synopsis of how this study contributes to the existing literature.

#### **Intimate partner violence: Definition, statistics, risk factors**

On the spectrum of IPV, RD might not escalate beyond the level of a heated argument. However, it may shift to involve physical exchanges, the milder forms of which are called common couple violence (CCV), with the most severe form, namely intimate terrorism (IT) (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Common couple violence is identified by Johnson (1995) as being a result of conflict that erupts into mild violence that usually does not result in serious injury or death, whereas intimate terrorism is violence that is more pervasive and invasive, and is where one partner uses a pattern of tactics designed to dominate the other (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Common couple violence can be initiated by either partner and IT is almost always unidirectional and initiated by the dominant partner, usually the male in socially traditional heterosexual couples (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Both CCV and IT are retaliatory. Since the aim of this study is to understand how African American couples use their



dyadic lived religious belief in their marriage to mitigate their stress and RD, it may be that a better understanding of partner violence and its attendant behaviors is warranted here.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is considered a preventable public health problem that includes controlling behavior and abuse of personal power (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; CDC, 2006). Intimate partner violence may be comprised of actions fitting the categories of physical, verbal, sexual, emotional and psychological violence, and the categories are not strictly discrete, because physical violence may have an emotional and psychological component. Physical violence includes pushing, slapping, kicking, hitting, battering, throwing, grabbing, biting, burning, and stabbing; verbal violence can include belittling, and threats; emotional violence behaviors include isolation, coercion and stalking; sexual violence behavior includes rape; and psychological violence behavior can include fear tactics, and withholding resources and love (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; CDC, 2006; Moore, 1999). A study of African American clergy found that some clergy expand the definition of partner violence to include serial adultery because of the ways in which it recreates the sense of powerlessness, psychological and spiritual violence upon the victimized partner (Dyer, 2010). Partner violence is directional in that it can be male-to-female partner violence (MFPV) or female-to-male-partner violence (FMPV), or it can be mutually perpetrated with each partner initiating the violence during the same incident or at different instances. MFPV is more prevalent (DOJ, 2007; Field & Caetano, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), and as such will be the form of IPV referred to in this study unless otherwise noted.

Department of Justice statistics show that between 2001 and 2005, the most common type of threat used between partners was a threat to harm, experienced by approximately 59% of the female victims and 55% of the males. The most common type of violent action as identified to

police by victims could be divided into two groups. In one group, 62.7% of women and 62.2% of men reported the violent behaviors they experienced as “hit, slapped, knocked down,” (DOJ, 2007). In the second group, 54.9% of the women and 26% of the men reported experiences of being “grabbed, held or tripped” to the police (DOJ, 2007). These numbers emerge from the same reporting population, which indicates overlap of the violent behavior experienced by the two groups. Fifty-one percent of all the women who experienced nonfatal attacks were injured compared to 41% of the men, more than 60% of all nonfatal IPV for both women and men occurred in the home of the victim (DOJ, 2007). The highest rates of nonfatal violence occurred in urban areas (DOJ, 2007). Interestingly, 51% of African Americans reside in metropolitan areas, as contrasted with 21% of White Americans (McKinnon, 2003). The indication is that African Americans reside in areas with the highest rates of nonfatal partner violence, most likely secondary to the concentration of factors that contribute to IPV as a result of social injustices identified.

African American men are much more likely than their (non-Hispanic) White or Latino counterparts to report engaging in IPV (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005; Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson, 2002; C. G. Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). In their National Violence Against Women study, Tjaden & Thonnes (2000) found higher incidence of IPV in two populations of color. The rates of 29.1% for African Americans and 37.5% for Native American/Alaskan Native women were higher than those for White Americans at 24.8% and Asian Pacific Islanders at 15.0%. Field & Caetano (2005) found in their review of national surveys that the highest rates of MFPV were consistently reported among African Americans over Latinos and White Americans. African American females reported nonfatal IPV to the police in higher percentages than White women or African American men. Between 1993 and

2005 IPV rates dropped for White women and men as well as for African American women; however, the nonfatal violence rates still remained highest for African American women (DOJ, 2007). During same time period, no change was indicated in the nonfatal violence report rates for African American men.

### **Factors contributing to IPV**

The African American community endures many societal stressors that distress male-female relationships (Jordan, 2005; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; Utsey, et al., 2008; Waltermaurer, et al., 2006). Risk factors for partner violence include stress from the disenfranchisement experienced by people of color, unemployment, income disparity in couples, poverty, financial problems, health disparities, social isolation, experience of disparity in community resources and living in areas of social disadvantage (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Caetano, et al., 2005; Cunradi, 2007; Dyer, 2010; C. G. Ellison, Trinitapoli, Anderson, & Johnson, 2007; Hamel, 2009; Paranjape, Corbie-Smith, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2009; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Many of these risk factors exist disproportionately in the African American community due to past and present racial inequity (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Jalata, 2002; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Jordan, 2005; Utsey, et al., 2008). Factors contributing to intimate partner violence are exacerbated within the African American community because of racism (Jang & Johnson, 2004; Jordan, 2005; King, 1991; Utsey, et al., 2008).

The result of the disenfranchisement of racism on African Americans is devastating. Racism affects both sexes on institutional and individual levels. One in nine African American men between the ages of 20 and 34 were incarcerated in 2006, that is approximately 11% of the African American male population, as compared to the rate of one in 106 White men older than the age of 18 years (E. Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008; Warren, 2008). Almost 54% of

those imprisoned for drug related offenses are African Americans (Fellner & Vinck, 2008).

African American men are much more likely than their (non-Hispanic) White or Latino counterparts to report engaging in IPV (Caetano, et al., 2005; Caetano, et al., 2002; C. G. Ellison, et al., 1999). Additionally, because of systemic and institutional racism, African American women are “dual minorities,” that of gender and race-ethnicity, who are “most likely to live in extreme poverty,” inadequate housing, and have added health and societal stressors (Jordan, 2005). These factors increase the risk of IPV.

### **Salutary effects of religious belief**

An overwhelming majority of studies show a positive relationship between religion and both physical health and mental health (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Hackney & Sanders, 2003b; Hamdy, 2004; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Levin & Chatters, 1998; Olive, 2004; Park, 2005). Koenig & Larson (2001 as cited in Hackney & Sanders, 2003b) found that in two thirds of the studies that showed an association between religion and depression, those identified as more religious had lower depression rates. While there are negative effects associated with religion and health and mental health, they are generally associated with (a) poor coping styles, (b) a belief that God is punishing a person, or (c) anger with God (Bjorck & Thurman, 2007; Flannelly, et al., 2004). However, Bjorck and Thurman (2007) found in their research sample that when religious coping is used people tended to use more positive than negative coping mechanisms, and that negative coping was associated with an increased number of negative life events as opposed to a single traumatic event.

Religion has many conduits by which it exerts its influence such as the lived experiences in peoples' daily lives, their value systems and their behavior (Park, 2005). Religious belief influences the method of coping with stress and negative life events for those who identify

themselves as believers. For them, religion facilitates meaning making and has a moderating effect that reduces the impact of stress and negative events and supports coping strategies (Jang & Johnson, 2003; Park, 2005). Being able to make meaning of life events is a type of existential coping that is important to well being and life satisfaction (Emmons, 2005; Roccas, 2005). Considering that religious belief plays an important role in the lives of African Americans, it is logical to conclude that religious practices as a means to cope are used regularly. In their discussion of informal supports used by African Americans, Chatters et al (2002) note that the majority of the sample respondents utilize family and church members for support.

Coping from a religious perspective often includes the belief of a “sense of divine control.” Shieman et al. define ‘sense of divine control,’ as “the extent to which an individual perceives that God exerts a commanding authority over the course and direction of his or her life,” (Schieman, Pudrovskaya, Pearlin, & Ellison, 2006, p. 529). Investment in this belief is notable among those who subscribe to a deity who is involved in every aspect of their lives. A benefit of this belief is a sense of protection for the person who is a believer (Schieman, et al., 2006). However, this person would also experience a great deal of distress at the thought of being out of favor with God (Schieman, et al., 2006). Shieman et al (2006) found that African Americans report higher level of divine control than White Americans and for African Americans of lower socio-economic status, there is a negative relationship between the sense of divine control and distress. Bierman (2006) and Jang & Johnson (2004) discuss that the salutary effects of religion found in their research may also protect against discrimination. In addition, they found that increased attendance at a religious organization more was beneficial for African Americans than for White Americans (Bierman, 2006). This benefit is attributable to many possible factors such as the social support gained by the African American couple from

participation in a religious community or the emphasis on social justice, forgiveness and spiritual coping from the pulpit in African American churches (Bierman, 2006). These same factors also increase the individual's sense of control in the African American community which will reduce the personal sense of distress (Jang & Johnson, 2004).

### **Conceptualizing the sacred: Religion/spirituality and marriage**

Religion is a significant means by which many people identify interactional norms and relate to their social environment (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Roccas, 2005). Swenson, Pankhurst and Houseknecht (2005) citing Swenson (1999) state that religion is “the individual and social experience of the sacred that is manifested in mythologies, rituals, and ethos, and integrated into a collective such as a community or an organization” (Swenson, et al., 2005, p. 530). The authors further describe each term in their definition. Individual experience is considered to be religious experience or spirituality, social experience is equated with ritual, which serves the purpose of recalling stories and events, mythologies are belief systems, ethos encompasses the behavioral mores and daily lived experiences and “values, norms, ethics, codes of conduct, and laws” (Swenson, et al., 2005, p. 530). Pargament et al. also defines religion as “the search for significance in ways related to the sacred,” and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the sacred as what is considered holy (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005, p. 667). In this study, when I refer to ‘the sacred,’ I refer to individual action, partnered interaction and other experiences that the participants identify between themselves and in relation to God, for example communication such as prayer, that they consider to be worth deep respect.

The practice of religion is also known as “lived religion” (Orsi, 2003). Lived religion benefits its practitioners on individual and group levels. The benefit stems from and is shaped by

the particular faith aspects that the individual or group employs to address any matter (Maton, Dodgen, Sto. Domingo, & Larson, 2005). It facilitates meaning-making, healing and is the template for daily living. “Lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on)” (Orsi, 2003, p. 172). Essentially it establishes the rules of assessment, engagement, relational maintenance and exclusion. Those subscribing to the same religion and religious sub-variants, or denominations, know that they already have some very basic principles for living in common with other members of their group, especially if that group is also ethno-culturally homogeneous. As such, they find mutual perspectives and supportive systems, where the characteristics and values of their group are positively framed and promoted (Littlefield, 2003). Additionally, Ellison (1993, as cited in Littlefield, 2003) notes that regular performance of faith practices are beneficial to the individual self esteem.

Religion has also been found to have some negative characteristics (Flannelly, et al., 2004; Maton, et al., 2005). The negative effects include a link to prejudice (Maton, et al., 2005), though this prejudice seems to be in relation to religious extremists since. However, if the word “religion” is used to indicate bias, then it is possible to extrapolate that, as discussed by Roccas (2005). People committed to a belief system will uphold the values of that group, thus making decisions showing bias toward those values. Flannelly et al. (2004) identify the following negative manifestations of religious practitioners: giving up personal responsibility to the deity, feeling cast off by their deity, believing a bad situation is deistic retaliation or anger, and believing that an individual does not have enough faith possibly to surmount unfavorable circumstances. The physical and mental health outcomes for those subscribing to the negative

practices are worse than for those who do not (Flannelly, et al., 2004). One negative coping strategy noted by Flannelly et al. (2004), that of deferring to one's deity is also noted as a negative strategy by Pargament et al., who comment that this strategy "may ultimately hinder the individual from confronting and dealing with personal problems and developing greater competence," (Pargament et al., 1988, p. 93). However, it is possible that in Christian belief systems the 'deferring' coping style has both negative and positive outcomes because deferring to God is a promoted value. For example, one person choosing to defer a decision with the caveat that "I'll pray about it," may be viewed negatively by someone not sharing the same faith as a comment used to avoid decision-making. Conversely that same phrase can be understood positively, perhaps more likely by someone else sharing the same faith, as the speaker choosing to seek guidance from God prior to acting presumptively.

The 'sacred,' as previously stated, is synonymous with what is considered 'holy' and is extended to anything that is set aside or sanctified to represent or house what is holy. Examples of the sacred include the sacraments of baptism, communion and marriage, or other special times of consecration or drawing closer to God (Pargament, et al., 2005). Anything considered sacred is treated with greater reverence, so behavior related to or that occurs within the sacred may be different, as within Christian marriages, than outside of sacred contexts. Studies looking at marriage find that it has beneficial effects on mental health and well-being, particularly if the couple employs religious beliefs (Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996; A. Mahoney et al., 1999; Stutzer, 2006). Mahoney et al. (1999, as cited by Pargament, et al., 2005) found greater satisfaction and devotion among married couples who considered their marriage to be sacred than those who did not consider their marriage sacred, but still viewed it as important. It is likely



that when religious couples experience any relational discord they will more readily invoke their faith to resolve it.

### **Marital conflict**

Mahoney (2005) loosely defines conflict, identified as relational discord (RD) in this study, as “an incompatibility between individuals or groups in their selection and pursuit of goals,” (p. 690), noting that it results from disagreement about goals. Religious belief, especially when held in common between the discordant parties, provides a means for resolution because it gives people the do and don’t guidelines for society, families and individuals (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Littlefield, 2003; A. Mahoney, 2005). Resolution strategies, are those methods people utilize to address their discord (A. Mahoney, 2005). Research studies have been designed to investigate relational discord in heterosexual couples (Allen, Baucom, Burnett, Epstein, & Rankin-Esquer, 2001; Beach, Katz, Kim, & Brody, 2003; Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007; Ridley, Wilhelm, & Surra, 2001), religious beliefs and relational discord in religious couples (E. Brown, et al., 2008; Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998; Carolan & Allen, 1999; Fox, Blanton, & Morris, 1998; A. Mahoney, 2005), and religious beliefs of partners and the likelihood of partner violence (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; C. G. Ellison, et al., 1999; C. G. Ellison, et al., 2007). Drumm et al (2006) found that the prevalence of partner violence in a sample of 1431 conservative Christians was 46% for those who had experienced some form of partner violence at least once in their lifetime. However, the findings do not clarify what percentage of IPV in this sample occurred after making a commitment to their particular belief system, and the study does not explore the way couples utilize religious belief in their relationship. Among couples, those who subscribe to religion, tend to utilize methods emphasized by or rooted in their belief

systems to resolve their discord. These strategies may or may not be functional (Butler & Harper, 1994; A. Mahoney, 2005).

This study being reported in this manuscript adds to the literature by investigating how the couple does or does not apply their faith dyadically when resolving conflicts. It adds the role and dimensions of religious belief to exploration of the dyadic language and interaction. Furthermore, this study makes a contribution to our understanding of how couples in relatively non-distressed relationships resolve conflicts. This predominantly qualitative mixed methods study uncovers embedded behaviors and characteristics of couples. The means for determining this are identified in the methodology. The rationale for studying these couples is that I want to investigate the role and function of religion for the couple that does not have the added stressor of negotiating partner violence. This reflects an approach which is both strengths-based and contextual. A contextual approach incorporates “the belief that one must understand successful development before one can understand disordered development,” (Lesser & Pope, 2007, p. 21). In addition, the following discussion reviews the attendant assumptions of this research study.

## **Conceptual Framework and Questions**

### **Womanist methodology**

Womanist methodology predominantly informs the study design and analysis. Womanist methodology is a qualitative inquiry that recognizes the multiplicative effects of gender, race-ethnicity and class upon the African American community and supports the ethic of resistance to those and all oppressions individually as well as interactively. Womanist methodology “clarifies how diverse cultural productions of everyday life influence the decisions and practices which womanists make and implement in their lives,” (Thomas, 1998). The term “womanist” was

coined by Alice Walker who defined it in her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, originally published in 1983. Walker defined it comprehensively by stating that a Womanist is “[c]ommitted to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female,” is spiritual, life and self-affirming, not a separatist (seeking fulfillment separately from the men in our community), emotionally balanced and capable (Gilkes, 2001; Perry & Davis-Maye, 2007; J. Y. Taylor, 1998, 2005). No distinction is made in this paper between Black feminist thought and Womanist methodology.

The definition captured the sentiments and imagination of African American women, especially regarding what it means to be African-descended and feminist or Womanist; it included spirituality and so influenced the development of Womanist theology. The elements of Womanist theory as it continues to develop, has been described as “emergent” by Littlefield (2003), still remains close to the definition provided by Walker. I synthesize here the basic considerations of Womanist methodology, epistemology and research methods. The methodology includes the elements of: discourse, advocacy and resistance/action regarding issues of social injustice in our communities; education regarding multiplicative rather than additive effects of the intersections of race-ethnicity, gender and class; and inclusion of rather than separation from men in our strivings, while simultaneously challenging sexism (Gilkes, 2001; J. Y. Taylor, 1998, 2005; Williams, 1987). Using Womanist methodology in an ethnographic approach, one is able to examine “hidden agendas, power imbalances, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain African American individuals, families, and communities,” (J. Y. Taylor, 1998). The epistemological principles include: recognition of concrete experiences as units of meaning making; conviction that narratives are laced with symbolic meaning, so the value to meaning making is the story not its elements;

connectedness in conversation validates knowledge because it facilitates assessment of the caring and commitment of the speaker to the topic of concern (P. H. Collins, 2003).

The methods used for research tend to be qualitative in order to maintain the epistemological principles. The primary strategy for collecting data is the interview. The interview allows the voice of the participant to be heard, so that the person may testify about the matter at hand. “Testimony” is not used in a strictly religious context. “Oppression and suffering make testimony important for psychological survival. Testimony does not resolve black problems but does transform them from the private troubles of distressed individuals into the public issues of a covenant community,” (Gilkes, 2001). The testimony is also an act of resisting oppression and asserting self-efficacy and “to reclaim one’s humanity,” (J. Y. Taylor, 1998). The presence of one who gives testimony implies that someone else is a witness, which is the position of the researcher. We, as researchers, are participant witnesses. Highlighting the value of connection mentioned above by Collins (2003), J. Y. Taylor describes the role and responsibility of the participant witness researcher in developing research for the social benefit of the African American community, “In this mutual space of copresencing, we affirm and validate the experience as real. ... The researcher as one who bears witness must be responsible and accountable for progressive critical reflection and interpretation of the stories,” (J. Y. Taylor, 1998). The interview data is analyzed for patterns and themes and the findings are organized in a way that preserves the testimony and voice of those who generated the knowledge (J. Y. Taylor, 2005).

### **Womanist perspective in this research design**

The phenomenon of disproportionate disenfranchisement due to racism is complicated by sexism, which contributes to convoluted male-female interactions among African American men

and women. Those impediments in turn trigger the silence of many voices in the community. As such, another facet in the design of this study is to provide a vehicle for the voices of religious African American couples to make their interactional realities known, and so contribute to the development of culturally competent interventions and/or theories. Respecting the participant as expert is a Womanist perspective. This approach emphasizes that the stories of a people are best told by those people. Womanist methodology as a conceptual approach focuses on validating and promoting the cultural knowledge and strengths of the African American community. It is the most appropriate methodology for research involving this population because it promotes the thesis that the wisdom that can be learned from the lives of African Americans, should come from them directly (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Littlefield, 2003).

The primary discussions of Womanism are focused on the world of African American women, but being Womanist is not restricted to members of the African American community. It invokes the unified breadth of African American women's experiences and their survival strategies (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Littlefield, 2003). African American men are a part of that world and those strategies. This approach motivates its subscribers to "[seek] the enfranchisement and dignity of all human beings across the social divisions of race, gender, class, and sexuality," (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 438). So from a Womanist perspective, racism, sexism, classism and other social pressures interact and complicate the lives of African Americans on each societal level; individual and couple, local and extended community.

Elements of Womanist methodology evident in this study design include as foremost, the recognition of faith as a source of strength and coping in the African American community. Religious belief is one of the community resources that is able to counter the negative effects of various societal "isms" as noted above, and continues to serve an important and central role in

the African American community (Bent-Goodley, 2009; Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2009; Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009; Waites, 2009). Within that community the faith leader is a trusted community member and an important agent for social change, community education and access to services (R. J. Taylor, et al., 2000). For this reason the individuals who helped to identify participants in their churches were lay leaders. The primary means of data gathering was through interviews. As a result, the participants' own understanding of their experience shaped the data. Each level of the data analysis, i.e. content categories and labels, was guided by the content of the interviews. Additionally, the findings section incorporates much of the raw data in order to retain the "voice" of the participant, which is a Womanist perspective. Discussion of how I blend the Womanist methodology and the techniques of phenomenology is found on in the Analysis section.

### **Phenomenological techniques**

This study examines the lived religious experience of African American couples with respect to dyadic interactions and the role of religion/spirituality to manage relational discord. A method of inquiry designed to investigate lived experience is phenomenology, which excises experience from the individual once the experience has been described.

The techniques focus upon dissecting that description to understand how meaning is ascribed to what has been described. The researcher 'brackets' or sets aside her own assumptions, biases and experiences so the essence of how meaning was ascribed to the experience by the participant is understood. The knowledge generated from reducing the experience to its basic components is the knowledge sought. The goal is to understand how the experience is interpreted as being meaningful to the one who lived it. Husserl was the progenitor of phenomenological inquiry, believing that positivist inquiry was not an acceptable means of

investigating human experience. Husserl's process of "eidetic variation" is the process of reduction or 'unpeeling the onion' to get to the essence of a thing (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). When all that can be removed is removed nothing is left but what cannot be removed (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). Despite the rejection of positivist approaches, phenomenology is an exemplar of object-subject methodology.

The object-subject approach is the antithesis of a Womanist approach. This is addressed in later variation of phenomenology, i.e. by Merleau-Ponty (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). Merleau-Ponty's inclusion of people interpreting experience and ascribing meaning to an experience recognizes that perspectives of a given experience change with the person having the experience and so different people will have different perceptions of the same experience. His approach permits triangulation of perceptions of an experience to get to the essence of it; however, full knowledge of the experience was unobtainable because the ultimate truth was unknowable. As quoted by van Manen (2002) Merleau-Ponty stated that "[t]he most important lesson that the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction." Regardless, the emphasis remains that of getting to the essence of a phenomenon: "Phenomenology is concerned with understanding a phenomenon rather than explaining it," (Sadala & Adorno, 2001).

Heidegger, initially aligned with the existential phenomenology approach of Merleau-Ponty, moved to believing language itself is the means for interpretation of experience, called hermeneutical phenomenology (vanManen, 2002). The techniques for generating that knowledge vary around several core progressions: (a) generating the data, usually through interviews; (b) analyzing the data by finding then coding the meaning elements; (c) identifying themes in the experience; (d) describing the experiential meaning of the experience (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

### **Marital triad**

Griffith (1986) discussed the 'God-family' relationship and the practical and valuable role God plays in the family. God's presence in the family takes on the status of another family member and becomes part of the family system (Griffith). This concept was later discussed by Butler and Harper (1994) as 'the Divine Triangle.' They specifically relate the idea of God as a family member to God having a similar function in religious couples, stating that they have a triadic relationship that I label 'the marital triad.' In this Divine Triangle, God is triangulated by the couple for the benefit or detriment of the relationship, in Bowenian fashion. In a marital triad, God functions as a family member, is incorporated into the family system, facilitates resolution of conflict, and helps to regulate the relationship in positive ways if the relationship is a healthy one. It is possible that since these participants are religious/spiritual couples, they will incorporate God into their relationship in a marital triad. The data will confirm or refute the presence of marital triads in faith-believing couples and how it functions.

### **Assumptions and definitions**

The main assumption of this study is that faith practices reduce stress because they provide situational and general-life coping strategies, those strategies will also have a positive impact on individual and collective mental health (defined as well-being). This will in turn allow greater individual and collective resources for conflict resolution in the partner interaction, or dyadic process, which forestalls partner violence. Stress in the relationship is understood for the purposes of this study to be a given; that is all couples experience some kind of general life stress throughout the duration of their relationship. Those tensions may vary based on incidental life



situations or emergent crises. African American couples have the added dynamic of race-ethnic related stress. All stress is considered to contribute to relational tensions in some manner. Relational discord might not precipitate partner violence, but could nonetheless contribute to other situations and may be triggered by individual and/or interactional factors potentially leading to couple conflict. Resolution is considered to be the de-escalation of tensions that may arise between the partners.

Relational discord is defined as couple conflict that may result from relationship tensions. Stress can reduce positive individual participation in the relationship, thus reduce the relational health of the couple, which may trigger conflict or relational discord. Both stress and RD are factors in partner violence, so it is assumed then that stress reduction and conflict resolution via the couple's religious or 'sacred' dyadic process may reduce or prevent partner violence. The dyadic process is the interactional process between the partners comprising the couple. The focus on religion is two-fold. First, a number of studies show that religious belief is protective, buffers stress and that increased religiosity, defined as high frequency of church attendance, has an inverse relationship with partner violence (Cunradi, et al., 2002; C. G. Ellison & Anderson, 2001; C. G. Ellison, et al., 2007; Hackney & Sanders, 2003a; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Levin & Chatters, 1998). Second, African Americans attend church with greater frequency than White Americans and seem to prefer faith-based services and support (E. Brown, et al., 2008; R. J. Taylor, et al., 2000).

### **Research questions**

It is critical to understand how African American couples utilize this cultural resource of religion/spirituality in their marital relationships. The gap in the literature is the meaning or and use of religion embedded in the dyadic interactions of African American couples whose

relationships are healthy. The purpose of this research was to uncover the couples' use of mutual religious beliefs and practices to address stress and RD. The research questions are:

- How do the partners talk about the collective sacred process?
- How pervasive is this application of 'the sacred' for them individually and dyadically, notably for the well-being and stress of their relationship?
- What aspects of the partners' mutual religious/spiritual interactions are functionally employed by the couples to address their relational discord?

## **Chapter 2 ---- Methodology and Research Design**

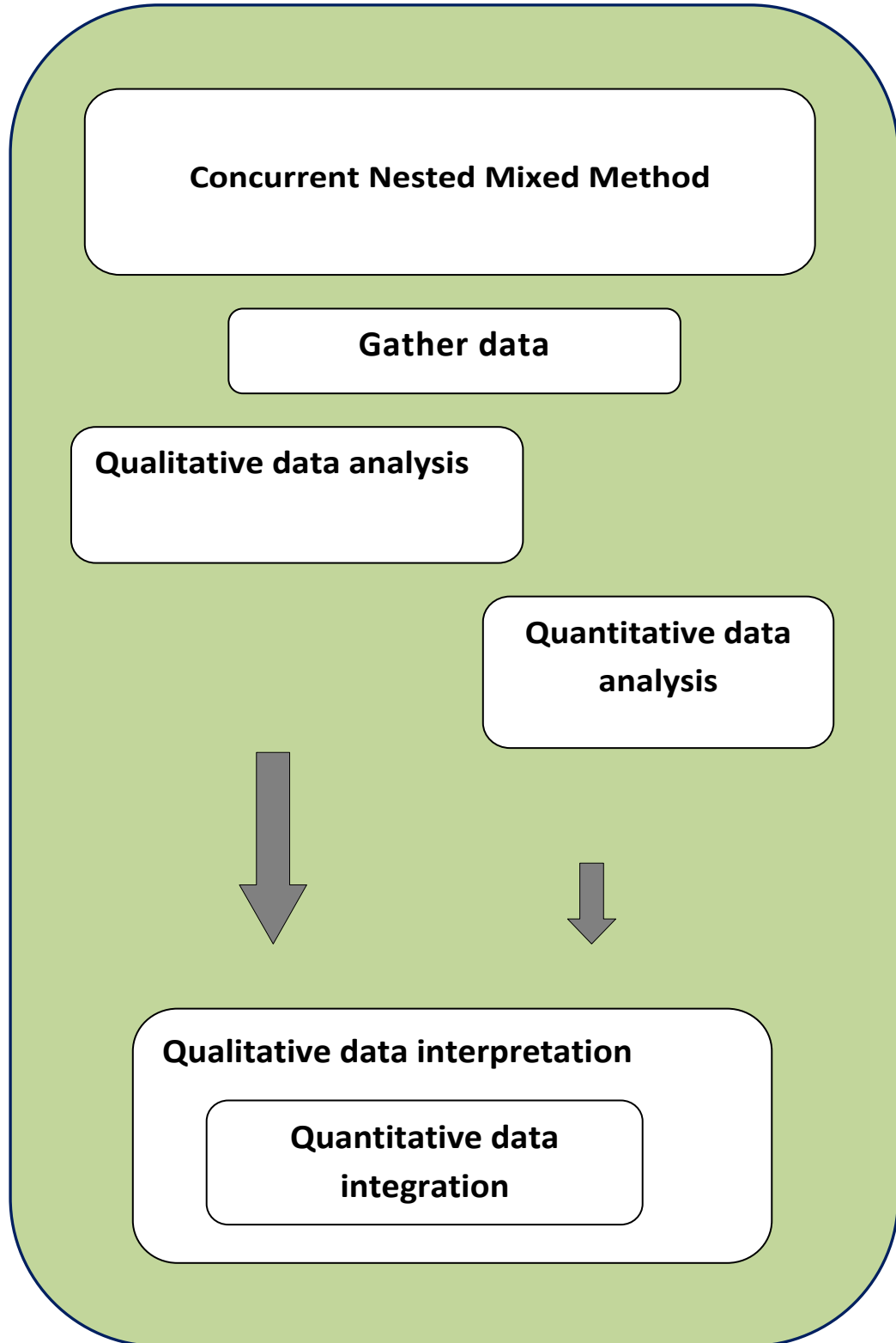
## **Research Methodology and Design Strategies**

### **Study design**

Within the research field of couple interaction, investigations tend to utilize the data from one partner in the couple (Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007). However, when exploring dyadic couple concerns, the stronger investigative model for obtaining data about couple interaction is to obtain data from both partners. In this study a within-dyad model is used, where information from both partners is collected (Lyons & Sayer, 2005). Partners get to know each other over time, and develop mutual understandings and language both verbal and nonverbal (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007). That mutual language, dyadic in nature, facilitates the couple's navigating of their relationship because it is from a common understanding between them. Should either partner misread the dyadic language, the result can be emotional pain and / or some other relational discord (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007). As previously stated, the goal of this study is to better understand what aspects of a couple's beliefs functionally counter relational discord, and whether those aspects are manifested and utilized solely or dyadically.

A visual representation of the study design can be referenced in Figure B. This is a mixed methods study, in which qualitative interviews along with a quantitative questionnaire comprised of several evaluative scales, generated data.

**Figure B: Research methods and analysis model**



I used a concurrent nested strategy (Creswell, 2003) wherein the quantitative method provided an assessment of areas not explored in the qualitative interview and was nested in the qualitative method. As discussed by Creswell (2003), “a nested approach has a predominant method that guides the project. Given less priority, the method (quantitative or qualitative) is embedded or nested, within the predominant method (qualitative or quantitative). ... The data collected from the two methods are mixed during the analysis phase of the project. This strategy may or may not have a guiding theoretical perspective,” (p. 218). Data from each method was gathered in the first phase of this study, and then analyzed in the second phase. The third phase of this study was the integration of all the analyzed data, for increased insight. The qualitative data allowed exploration of the interactive faith process with the couple, and the quantitative data provided more specific information from the participants regarding the levels of faith commitment, stress, conflict and dyadic interaction that may not have been assessed by the interviews. The quantitative data also provided methodological triangulation of some of the interview content, such as health of the relationship and utilization of faith practices dyadically and when stressed.

### **Sample**

This study was designed to identify the use of dyadic religious processes among African American couples (by birth and/or residence in the United States longer than one year). It employed purposive sampling to engage participants from the African American religious community. In phenomenological studies, 6-10 participants can be considered an average sample range (Padgett, 2008, p. 56). These numbers are identified because smaller numbers in

qualitative studies generate enough data to reach saturation; the sample is determined by as many as needed to achieve the goal of data saturation (Goering & Streiner, 1996; Marshall, 1996; Sobal, 2001). The sample size for this study was 8 couples. Data saturation was achieved in this study. Saturation, to use the description by Padgett (2008), is when data obtained becomes redundant and no new information is obtained, and completeness in the data is obtained “from depth rather than breadth,” (pp. 128, 172).

The couples were recruited via assistance from lay church leaders in the greater New England region whom I asked to identify couples in their churches. The sample is purposive and comprised of legally married heterosexual couples who are practitioners of traditional Protestant Christian faith. The basic tenets of this belief includes recognition of Jesus ‘the Christ’ as incarnate God or Lord; building unity in ‘the body’ of practitioners through evangelical outreach and loving communication that edifies and encourages; and emphasizes heterosexual marriage as the foundational family unit, in which the man is the lead authority figure. The male leading the family, follows the model of Christ, who was self sacrificing to the point of death for the benefit of others. Examples of expressions of these tenets and practices from the Bible and secular organizations are identified in Appendix F.

A letter was prepared for volunteer lay leaders who I knew to provide information about the study so that participants in their churches could initiate contact with me to further discuss their participation in the study. The lay leaders were asked to identify couples in their churches they thought would be willing to participate, to give such couples two of these introduction packets. They informed the couples that the letter packet would give some information about the study and the researcher. For religiously homogamous couples attending different churches, the leader contacted the person attending the same church as the leader and that person gave

materials to his or her partner so that both partners would be able to initiate contact with me regarding the study. These lay leaders let the couples know that if interested, they each would need to read the introductory letter, then separately complete and mail the enclosed contact forms so that the researcher received a form from each partner.

These couples came from churches belonging to different Protestant denominations located in cities or rural areas. No particular denomination was targeted, only those couples deemed by the volunteer lay leader to be relationally healthy and free of partner violence were invited to participate. As such, the sample was fairly homogenous, not maximizing any particular population or behavioral variation other than being African American Protestant Christians from the greater New England Area. Once I received the forms from both partners, I contacted the couple to confirm a time and place to meet and further discuss the research, answer questions, and obtain informed consent.

Religiously homogamous couples, those having the same belief system, and having relatively healthy marital relationships where there is no partner violence, were the focus of this study for reasons previously discussed. Therefore inclusion criteria for participants were legally married African American traditional Protestant Christian couples who were not experiencing IPV. The exclusion criteria were couples experiencing IPV, unmarried couples and religiously heterogamous couples in which the partners hold different religious beliefs. Mixed-ethnic couples in which one partner does not identify as a member of the African Diaspora, and couples of other ethno-cultural groups were excluded from the interviews. The goal was to find couples not engaged in partner violence, however, if a disclosure occurred, the research activity would have ceased and while maintaining the confidentiality of the affected person, a supportive



referral would have been made to an appropriate resource. The activities of this study were pre-tested with one volunteer couple prior to general implementation.

Couples with the same belief but with the partners attending different churches, initially were excluded from the sample. I thought having both partners attend the same church would provide the most consistent and rich data. However, as the data were collected I noted that there was a good deal of inconsistency from the couple-partners when reporting what they learned from their churches. This nullified any reason to utilize only couples from the same church. Two couples were included whose partners attended different churches, though they also visited each other's church on occasion and were at different stages in considering consolidating their attendance at one church. These couples provided a great deal of consistency between the partners in reporting the impact of their faith tenets upon their lives, matching the conversation of the other six couples seamlessly, and their contributions enhanced the richness in the overall data.

### **Instruments**

The qualitative portion of this study used a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions and probes. The interview guide (Appendix D) was developed to solicit the data with consistency on certain topics about the couple, their relationship, their beliefs and perspectives about how one partner implements and believed the other partner implemented his or her beliefs to manage their relationship and respond to any discord that might arise. The goal was to obtain information about how each perceived her/his faith approaches and practices as well as those of her or his partner, and to gain an understanding of the dyadic process in the relationship.

The quantitative assessment was a questionnaire comprised of the brief versions of several psychometric assessment scales and was scored prior to full data analysis but administered prior to the interview. The questionnaire was provided in a printed format, so that it could be administered to each partner separately. The questionnaire gathered information on five different research constructs; spirituality, well-being, stress, RD, and dyadic interaction (Appendix C). Spirituality as previously discussed, is important in the African American community and has been shown to positively influence well-being, and thus having an inverse effect on stress and relational discord. General and race-ethnic related stress was explored in one of the assessment scales. The scales were chosen because I thought these factors may influence or be influenced by the dyadic interaction, which was one of the foci of this study. The quantitative questionnaire generated information about these constructs from a different perspective than the interview questions. After scoring the assessment data was integrated with the qualitative data for each participant to provide added depth and breadth to the full data analysis of each participant prior to interpretation across participants. Integrating the quantitative data prior to the analysis enhanced the interpretation of the qualitative data (Figure B). The quantitative data was not analyzed statistically due to the sample size which, though adequate for a qualitative study, was not large enough for an independent, viable statistical analysis.

The scales employed in this study helped to create a comprehensive picture of the partners' well being as well as their overall relational health and interactions. Appendix C provides a graphic overview of the constructs and scales. Combining the original version of each of the scales for the series of quantitative questionnaires would have resulted in disproportionately lengthening this segment of the study. The shortened scales or brief versions

of original scales were chosen for the specific issues they targeted, and for their relatively strong reliability ratings. First, the screening questions to assess relational discord were administered at the time of initial contact after voluntary informed consent was obtained. These instruments were modified versions of the “Women’s experience with battering” scale (WEB), and the “Women Abuse Screening Tool-short form” (WAST-s). The WAST-s is a 2-item instrument with a construct validity relative to the full 7-item WAST scale of .86 and an abuse risk inventory of .90 (Basile, Hertz, & Back, 2007). The WEB is a 10-item Likert scale with an alpha of .95. The language in both of these scales was modified to be neutral, i.e. ‘spouse’ instead of ‘wife,’ so they can be administered to both women and men, and were administered as part of the inclusion/exclusion screening process (Appendix E).

The instruments used to further assess faith, were the “Daily Spiritual Experience Scale” (DSES), and the 18-item short form of the Religious Problem-solving Scale (RPSS-sf). The DSES attempts to measure daily religious and spiritual experience of individuals not just their practices (Holland & Neimeyer, 2006; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). This is a 16-item scale that has very strong Chronbach alphas of .94 (Underwood & Teresi, 2002), and .95 (Holland & Neimeyer, 2006). The 18-item collaborative religious problem-solving scale will be used (RPSS-C), which has three sub-scales that identify religious coping style. The sub-scales and their Chronbach alpha scores very strong (a) Collaborative-style is .93, (b) Self-directing-style is .91, and Deferring-style is .89 (Pargament, et al., 1988). The coping styles refer to individual preference in relation to God.

The assessment of the well-being and stress of the members of the couple are the Spiritual Well-being Scale (SWBS), the “Perceived Stress Scale” (PSS), and the “Index of Race-Related Stress” brief version (IRRS-b). The SBWS is a 20-item inventory containing two sub-

scales; one assessing spiritual well-being having a Chronbach alpha of .96, and the other assessing existential well-being, and has a Chronbach alpha of .86 (Bufford, Paloutzian, & Ellison, 1991; C. W. Ellison & Smith, 1991). The PSS is a 10-item scale with alpha .84 (Hawkley, Masi, Berry, & Cacioppo, 2006). The IRRS-b is an instrument with 3 sub-scales measuring cultural, institutional and individual racism with Chronbach alphas of .78, .69 and .78 respectively (Utsey, 1999). In a later study Utsey et al. (2008), the Chronbach alphas for cultural and individual racism are .81 and .79 respectively. These scales provided information about possible interactions, being that racism would exacerbate a person's sense of perceived stress, which in turn would negatively affect that person's sense of well-being. The final measure, exploring the interactional coping process of couples, is the 37-item Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI). The DCI has a Chronbach alpha for women is .93 and for men is .92 (Bodenmann, 2006).

### **Procedure**

First, approval for the study was obtained from the Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB). Then potential participants were recruited via a lay leader in their church. This individual was given a recruitment packet that she/he then gave to a potential participatory couple. The recruitment packet included contact and demographic information and self-addressed stamped envelopes. Each partner was asked via the letter in the recruitment packet, to complete the contact and demographic information and return it to me using the enclosed stamped envelope. The letter also explained that the couple would only be contacted if both envelopes, one for each partner, were received. Then I contacted potential participants based on the returned agreements and arranged an initial meeting to discuss the study and informed voluntary consent. The informational meeting occurred at a mutually convenient location and time. Participants were also informed that the data may be included in a future secondary data

analysis project. Any participant documentation would be coded so that each partner in a couple would be identifiable only by gender.

Procedures of the study were explained to the participants, and opportunity given for questions prior to obtaining the signed informed consent. Then the RD screening questionnaire was administered to the two separately but simultaneously but separately in two different rooms. Once the screenings were completed, a couple would be “screened in.”

Since the couples were asked to participate based on the lack of partner violence, there was no anticipated risk associated with participation in this study. However, if responding to the questions triggered any emotional distress for a participant, a list of mental health resources was prepared for support as needed. The scales designed to assess for partner violence were the RD portion of the questionnaire. The RD portion of the questionnaire was administered at the time consent was obtained. The partners were given the study overview, had their questions answered, completed the RD questionnaire individually as previously stated, and then arranged for the qualitative interview and remaining quantitative tasks.

The RD questionnaire was scored immediately after its completion to confirm couple eligibility. Partners who scored high for RD, greater than 1 on the WAST and greater than 23 on the WEB (Appendix A), on screening would have been “screened out” for having a potentially violent relationship. If they scored high for RD, I would address their safety needs, give them an appropriate resource referral list, and encouraged them to attend supportive counseling. While this process was somewhat labor-intensive, providing the partners unsupervised RD screenings via the contact packets might have generated tensions in couples with a high potential for IPV, which was a safety concern. All the participants achieved scores that indicated there was no partner violence.

The partners were asked to each complete the assessment questionnaire. For consistency, the questionnaires were completed prior to the interviews. However, it was not always possible to administer the questionnaire to the two simultaneously and separately because of the couple's availability. At times of scheduling difficulty, the questionnaires and interviews were administered individually in sequence in consecutive meetings with the partners. Each of these three tasks, the informed consent and screening, the questionnaire, and the interview, were accomplished in two to three meetings, based upon the availability of the partners. After the interview, each partner was willing to participate in a follow-up meeting in order to review her/his own interview data for feedback and accuracy of transcription. They also got the opportunity to review their partners' transcripts and together discuss what thoughts were generated for them.

There were no designed direct benefits to the participants in this study; participants were offered a copy of the study findings. It is possible that the participants may benefit indirectly from the knowledge generated because sometimes a posed question has the effect of serving as an intervention. Another potential but indirect benefit was that this study and any future research stimulated by this study, may contribute to the development of culturally sensitive intervention strategies to enhance services provided to members of the broader African American community.

The interview with each partner was audio taped for transcription. The total time commitment per person for this study across sessions was about 2.5 hours. Some couples took additional time to make sure they were fully comfortable with all study related activities by asking all their questions. For the follow-up meeting that occurred 3 to 4 weeks after the initial interview, many partners took their time in reading the transcripts, though they had options for short reviews. All research data was stored in a locked file in my home, to which I alone have

access. I was also the transcriptionist. The tapes will be erased after completion of the study and written reports, and any future studies will use the de-identified transcripts only. Any pseudonyms used to identify the interviewees do not reflect any obvious or logical pattern so as to maintain their confidentiality. Coded identification facilitated separation of the raw data by gender and couple.

## **Analysis**

The interview data was analyzed using the phenomenological techniques previously identified. The qualitative data analysis program HyperResearch was used to organize and analyze the data. Initial in vivo, within documentation, coding was started as soon as transcription was completed (Milne & Oberle, 2005). This process enabled me to think about existing data and generate strategies for data collection in subsequent interviews. Following initial coding I immersed myself in the codes seeking to understand the meaning of the experience as conveyed by the partners. Codes were organized into themes to ascribe meaning to the experience as interpreted by the partners. Moreover, codes were continuously reviewed (added and/or removed appropriately) as new insights emerged.

The themes were inductively generated from the data. They are presented in the findings with as much of the raw qualitative data retained as possible to maintain the testimonies of the participants. This is consistent with Womanist methodology as previously described (Chapter 1). The outcomes are strongly reflective of the voice and content of the participants, keeping that voice central to my discussion. Retention of the raw data also allows others to assess the findings independently and affirm credibility of the data and its interpretation (Drisko, 1997, 2001). Data themes were analyzed for textural and structural descriptions, that is the experiences of the participants and the contexts of those experiences, respectively (Creswell, 1998; Padgett, 2008).

I bracketed my own ideas by documenting perspectives and assumptions by use of memo notes. I wanted the data to speak and not be encumbered by apriori concepts or models. The data alone conveyed the essence or meaning of the experience. Analysis was sequenced to move from raw data toward meaning as utilized by Groenewald (2004): a) bracketing, b) identifying 'meaning' units, c) clustering those meaning units into themes, d) summations of the interviews to identifying the textural and structural descriptions. However, I did not subscribe to the last step of distilling the themes and summations into a description of the phenomenon. This is where I departed from a phenomenological method in order to preserve a Womanist process. As previously discussed, meaning in Womanist methodology is derived from the narrative in context with its attendant symbolism. Presenting the data in collective story maintains the individual stories and contributions to the collective narrative. The reader becomes a witness to that testimony and the meaning in the experiences represented. The presentation of the findings and discussion chapters follows to some extent the innovative format used by Janette Y. Taylor (2005).

The interview data was generated using a semi-structured interview guide to allow topics related to this study to be consistently addressed, while the open-ended questions permitted rich data on those topics and a fluid conversational process. I transcribed the interviews then read them while listening to the audio tape to confirm accuracy of transcription. I did some preliminary data coding prior to the transcripts being reviewed by the participants in a follow-up appointment. The participants were able to confirm that the transcripts accurately represented their statements, comment on preferred revisions, and also comment on first round coding. Additionally, each participant had the opportunity to review and comment upon her or his



partner's transcript. The resulting exchanges provided greater insight into the dyadic process of the couples regarding the experiences being explored.

Once the transcripts were reviewed by the participants, I analyzed and coded them. Following peer debriefing from my committee members, I made revisions as needed. The codes were then organized into themes using HyperResearch, a qualitative computer analysis program to facilitate the data analysis. As previously mentioned the quantitative data was triangulated with the feedback from the participants, and this served to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of the full body of data. The analysis generated understanding and information about the experience of interactional or dyadic faith process in couples as visualized in Figure A (Chapter 1). Furthermore, it illustrated how that faith process interacts with their stress and conflict in keeping the couple healthy.

The research implementation and analysis model depicted in Figure B (Chapter 2) identifies the points of interest for a semi-structured interview. I initially planned to integrate the outcomes from the questionnaires once the qualitative data had been analyzed to the point of developing themes. However, I gave the participants the opportunity to respond to the questionnaire scores prior to developing themes. While they agreed with and appreciated the information the scores provided, in some cases they felt the outcomes provided incorrect information. This happened most frequently with the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI). The other scale that was somewhat problematic was the Index of Race-Related Stress (IRRS-b). There was a confounding trend in the responses where the scores indicated moderate or high stress experienced by participants who reported that they didn't feel they were stressed along race lines. As a result, the summarized questionnaire results were integrated with the return visit feedback from the participants. Those results were then integrated into the interview themes.

This gives the reader the opportunity to understand trends in the categorical topics represented by the questionnaire that were present in the participant interviews, but also included are the participants' acceptance or rejection of the questionnaire data.

The quantitative data was analyzed to provide methodological triangulation of qualitative content with objective data. The information from the questionnaire provided added depth to the interview data in ways that enriched the data interpretation. A summary of the questionnaire data is presented before the interview findings. The sample size was too small for statistical analyses. However, the quantitative data provided information about trends that could be explored in a separate future study, notably the information provided on racial stress, in this way it provides pilot data for continued research.

### **Rigor.**

There are six strategies that establish rigor in a qualitative study; prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, negative case analysis, and audit trail (Padgett, 2008, p. 187). In this study five of those strategies were implemented. Contact with the participants was prolonged as multiple contacts were made to obtain the quantitative and qualitative data. Triangulation was accomplished by use of two methods to obtain data to build richness in the data. A deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants emerged as a result of methodological triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. Peer debriefing was utilized by discussion of the research process and data analysis with the members of my committee and other colleagues for their feedback. Member checking was achieved by having the participants review and give feedback on their own transcript and that of their mates as well as on the questionnaire results. The participants were given the opportunity to both check transcriptions for accuracy and to comment on a draft of the findings. An audit trail was

implemented from onset of the study wherein I kept notes about my progress on the research, general thoughts on the data collection and any questions I may have had and rationale for coding discussions. I also made notes about my own experiences and biases to increase my awareness of them and to minimize how they influenced my interpretation of the data. I added two strategies to these. Extensive retention of the raw data facilitates the assessment of others about the trustworthiness of data interpretation and maintains the voice of the participants. Finally, rigorous research requires cultural sensitivity in the research design and implementation, and was integral to this study.

### **Human subjects review.**

The nature of this study required the use of human subjects. The issues involved in using human subjects as the basis for research include informed consent, maintenance of confidentiality, discussion of risks of participation, and discussion of any incentives for participation. The individuals who participated in this study were initially approached by a third party member of their churches. I asked the third party to give the potential couple a packet that provided some basic information about the research in a letter of introduction, a returnable “Contact & Information Form” (both in Appendix G), and a self-addressed stamped envelope for each partner. The detachable “Contact & Information Form” was completed and returned to me by each partner in the couple using the provided self-addressed stamped envelopes. This method of obtaining permission from the couple was preferred because it avoided any confusion and unnecessary delay for the couples interested in participating. It also avoided any researcher coercion.

Once I contacted and met with a potential participating couple, I discussed the research, answered questions and asked them to complete the RD screening questionnaire for scoring.

Then, based on acceptable passing scores, I arranged for the questionnaires to be completed independently by each partner of the couple. Part of obtaining informed consent included discussing with the participants that strictest confidentiality would be maintained in obtaining the data to protect their identity. They were also informed about possible risks, such as the potential emotional discomfort of responding to the questions, and the availability of resources if needed. The couples were informed that their participation was fully voluntary and that they could stop the process at any time without consequences. The couples were also informed that they would each received \$15.00 gift cards in remuneration for their time and participation in the study. For all couples, the results of the RD screening were reviewed after scoring since the results indicated the couples were eligible participants.

This study was eligible for and received an expedited review (Ellis, 1998) by the Boston College IRB for the following reasons: The study involved minimal risk and was not a clinical study that involved the use of drugs or medical devices; no blood or other biological specimens were collected; data was not collected via any invasive procedures; and all data collected was collected solely for the purpose of this study.

### **Chapter 3 ---- Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings and Discussion Introduction**

The Findings and Discussion Chapter is organized with discussion of the data interspersed throughout the findings. First I provide a summary of the demographic information and of the length of interviews in tables after the section reviewing the sample diversity and interview lengths. Those tables list the participants in order of the reference numbers and assigned pseudonyms. Prior to addressing the research questions, trust in the process and the researcher is discussed. Trust is an important concern related to research in the African American community. The interview themes and questionnaire results are then presented in context of the research questions.

The research questions are used to organize issues in the data into a three-part collective testimony about the dyadic religious-spiritual process of couples. Each of those parts is headed by the numbered research question. The themes presented are grouped in sub-themes related to the research questions that might contribute to a thorough discussion of that research question. Themes, which emerged from the data, are identified as themes and by the names of the sections and sub-themes under each research question. Data that is identified as a theme was discussed in some way by a majority of couples; otherwise it might have been considered a sub-theme or an outlying issue. Some outlying issues present in the data were included in the results for the richness and insight they added. In some cases an issue presented may have been mentioned by only one or two couples or one or two individual participants. When this occurs, it is included because the issue presented adds further insight to the theme being discussed. The quantitative data is integrated with the qualitative data according to topic similarity and discussed in relation to the qualitative content similarly to Mahoney, Simon-Rusinowitz, Loughlin, Desmond, &

Squillace (2004). Once the research questions are discussed, I found it important to a Womanist approach to revisit the contexts within which the research is couched (discussed in the literature review). The data provided additional insights regarding the topics of race-ethnicity intersections with marriage, faith and with possible contributing factors for partner violence in the African American community. This information was generated in the initial interview. The questions were asked to understand the couples' perspectives on the role of faith in their marital relationship. The questions were built upon queries of their experiences of being African Americans and whether racial stresses affected the relationship. In commenting on the initial interviews, the issue of factors that contributed to partner violence emerged spontaneously from some of the couples.

### **Format of findings**

In an effort to present the dyadic responses, comments are presented in partnered pairs when they are from the individual interviews which also preserve their individual stories. If the comment from one partner is representative of both partners, then that comment will appear without being paired. The discussion that introduces the section of quotations will indicate how the quotations are being presented. Commentaries from the follow-up interviews will be identified with the italicized label in parentheses “(*FU txt*).” In this way others can know if the participant's partner was present for those comments. In some cases an interactional segment of the partnered conversation is presented and will be identified with the italicized label in parentheses “(*Interaction; FU txt*).” If comments from the interviewer provide helpful context, they are indicated by “I” at the beginning of the comment. Dashes in the quotes represent an interruption or the sudden shifts and directional changes that naturally occur when we speak.

The questionnaires provided additional details on various aspects of their faith walk, how they managed stress, racism and their dyadic coping process. The couples were informed during the follow-up meeting about the results of the questionnaire and told that the questionnaire results provided snapshots into a moment in time and might turn out differently if taken at another time. The results of the questionnaire (Appendix A) are not statistically significant because the sample size is small. The scores were interpreted as an indication of trend, defined as tendency or preference, toward a particular behavior or state of being (i.e. stressed or not) for each couple. To do this, the raw numerical scores of each scale in the questionnaire were categorized so that each could be interpreted as a “high,” “moderate,” or “low” presence of the item being assessed (Appendix B). This plan for interpretation was reviewed with the progenitors of three of the scales (DCI, DSES, and RPSS) who all supported it as a viable option for the small sized sample. Based on that support, this manner of interpretation was applied to all the scales. In general the knowledge generated from the scales in the questionnaire complemented the content in the interviews, which increases the trustworthiness of the interview knowledge. The few exceptions are noted in the summary of the questionnaire results. Where the partners felt their scores should be different, the changed scores are reflected and highlighted in purple.

### **Sample diversity and interview length**

The partners across the participant couples ranged in age from 35 to 78 (Table 1). Three couples are naturalized Americans from different Caribbean nations; one partner in a fourth couple is first generation American; and the remaining four couples are all native to the United States. Regarding length of marriage, three couples were married for two years or less; three



couples married between thirteen and nineteen years; and two couples married for longer than 30 years. Age difference between the partners includes five partners within five years in age difference, and three partners with a difference of six to fifteen years. Three couples were in their first marriage; three couples had one previously married partner; and both partners for two couples had prior marriages; five ended in divorce and two through spousal death. The length of previous marriages for the seven previously married individuals lasted from three to 29 years, with the majority of these existing for twelve years or longer. There were distributions of two couples each for the following categories: no children, children together, one partner having children from the previous marriage but none from current marriage, and both partners having children from previous marriage but none from current marriage. Educationally, two participants have high school degrees; six participants have some college; four have college degrees; and four have Master's or other professional degrees. Other notable information, two participants had childhood histories in violent or abusive households; and two participants had a history of common couple violence; none of the participants are experiencing violence in their marital relationships.

Summary information is provided about the length of primary and follow-up interviews in Tables 2 & 3 respectively. The shortest individual interview occurred with Moe in couple 1 and the longest was with Reba in couple 5. The shortest follow-up interview occurred with Jose and Sena, couple 8; and the longest occurred with couple 2, Boaz and Ruth. They had a number of questions once they saw the transcripts and wanted to take more time to review them with me in detail.

**Table 1: Demographic Information – (next page)**

**Table 1: Demographic Information**

	Age	Prev. married Y/N; # tms	Lngst Prev. M --# yrs	# Years current marriage	Immigrant Y/N	# years @ current church	Denom	Last level of school completed
Couple								
1-Moe	54	Y; 1	7	18	N; USA	17	non-denom	some college
1-Orah	48	n/a	n/a	18	N; USA	17	non-denom	BA science
2-Boaz	62	Y; 1	29	2	Y; Belize, CtrAm	2	non-denom	some college
2-Ruth	61	Y; 1	12	2	Y; Belize, CtrAm	13	non-denom	some college
3-Jake	47	n/a	n/a	1	N; USA	47	baptist	BS
3-Rach	49	Y	3	1	N; USA	49	non-denom	M Ed
4-Dave	78	Y; 1	20	31	N; USA	30+; ch is combo,	evang. lutheran	law school
4-Seba	63	n/a	n/a	31	N; USA	30+; from 3 the in 70's	evang. lutheran	BA
5-Isak	53	Y; 1	19	13	N; USA	12	non-denom	1 yr college
5-Reba	45	Y; 1	9	13	N; USA	13	non-denom	Assoc degr
6-Adam	62	n/a	n/a	38	Y; Trin & Tob	14	pentecstl	12th gr
6-Ava	60	n/a	n/a	38	Y; Trin & Tob	14	pentecstl	college
7-Abe	44	n/a	n/a	19	Y; Trin & Tob	on & off	agnostic	high school
7-Sara	40	n/a	n/a	19	Y; Trin & Tob	19; changing	methodist	finishing college
8-Jose	37	n/a	n/a	<1yr	N; USA	37	evang. lutheran	master's
8-Sena	35	n/a	n/a	<1yr	N; USA	20	evang. lutheran	MBA

**Length of interviews in minutes****Table 2: Primary Interviews**

Length in minutes (final total in hours)

<b>Couple</b>	<b>Husband</b>		<b>Wife</b>	
1	Moe	24.35 (shortest)	Orah	25.39 min
2	Boaz	88.44	Ruth	53.05
3	Jake	57.03	Rach	50.39
4	Dave	64.21	Seba	35.01
5	Isak	67.48	Reba	95.46 (longest)
6	Adam	47.19	Ava	47.14
7	Abe	42.26	Sara	18
8	Jose	63.25	Sena	59.18
		<i>~ 8 hours</i>		<i>~ 6.42 hours</i>

**Table 3: Follow-up (FU) Interviews**

Length in minutes (final total in hours)

<b>Couple</b>	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>		
1	Moe	Orah	98.36 min	
2	Boaz	Ruth	73.43	115.25 (2 <sup>nd</sup> FU mtg.) Longest FU
3	Jake	Rach	88.58	
4	Dave	Seba	68.4	
5	Isak	Reba	75.13	
6	Adam	Ava	25.43	
7	Abe	Sara	35.59	
8	Jose	Sena	24.17	Shortest FU
			<i>~8.2 hours</i>	<i>(2<sup>nd</sup> ~~1.92)</i>

**Total** of **22 hrs 19min** for primary and follow-ups; becomes **24hrs 15min** with Couple 2 2<sup>nd</sup> F/U

### **Importance of trusting the process and researcher**

This section discusses issues of sensitivity to research in the African American community. It is important to address this topic prior to the analysis because it is related to cultural sensitivity in community based research. It is appropriately addressed here in recognition of on-going community sensitivities and the on-going assessments of the research process by six of the participant couples. However, the section does not address these issues as a research theme because the issue is not connected to the research questions. Six of the participant couples made comments that indicated concern or continued assessment about trust in the research process or how the findings would be used and trust in the researcher. This is important to note because the comments came almost completely during the collection of follow-up data, and well after the discussion of the study and voluntary consent was obtained. The comments may be related to the group sensitivities of the African American Diaspora to the ways in which research has historically been conducted in the African American community.

The African American community has a history of being unethically used in research, the community members are wary of people requesting their participation in research studies. Tuskegee is one example, and the story of Henrietta Lacks is another. In the notorious Tuskegee experiment, which ran for 40 years ending in 1972, up to 100 men died as a result of not being treated for syphilis and not being told they had contracted it (Freimuth et al., 2001). It is interesting that the number of men who died from the Tuskegee experiment is not accurately known which is testament to the callous regard for the participants. Multiplicatively in result, there are unknown numbers of women and children whose lives were negatively affected and/or lost because the uninformed, medically uneducated men would have continued to lead normal

lives including sex with one or more partners. Pregnancy in any of the women partnered with an uninformed infected research participant may have in turn affected that pregnancy. The Tuskegee study is an infamous reminder that the curiosity of others can kill.

Henrietta Lacks is the African America woman who died in 1951 at age 31 from cervical cancer. Her cancer cells, HeLa cells (first two letters of her first and last name), were taken without her knowledge or permission to create a cancer cell line for research purposes (NPR, 2010). The author of the book about Henrietta Lacks, Rebecca Skloot, discussed the impact of unethical research practices upon Henrietta's daughter, Deborah, and Henrietta's family starting with her attempt to meet with Deborah:

I was just another of a very long line of... white people coming who wanted something having to do with the cells. So scientists coming saying we want to take samples from you to do research to learn more about the...cells taken from this woman without her knowledge.... She would have these moments where...she would think, maybe Johns Hopkins sent me and I'm going to take her somewhere and take her cells. ... Someone came to her, you know, 25 years after her mother died and said 'hey, part of your mother is still alive and there's enough of it that if you put her cells in on end they'd wrap around the Earth three times. You know, they'd weigh more than 50 million metric tons.' And that was true.... (NPR, 2010)

Henrietta Lacks has been made immortal by being reduced to her eternally reproducing cancer cells. Safeguards now exist to prevent such abuses, but those safeguards have not erased the existence of racism as stated by Adam, "You can't change it, so just keep going." Those who come into the African American community need to come respectfully and not just to extract, but to enrich.

Because of this understanding, I designed the interview questions to be respectful of the belief systems and lives of the participants. As a result, to increase the cultural appropriateness of my study, I first interviewed, then discussed the interview guide for the study with a non-participating African American couple and revised the guide as needed. The guide facilitated the discussion of some topics and some questions were refined again after interviewing a participant, but the conversational nature of the interview permitted the participants to respond as they desired. Additionally, I made every effort to set the appointments for data acquisition at the convenience of the participants. Trust is important in the African American community. Several of the participants' comments were about trusting the process and/or the researcher. Equally important is the "ethic of accountability," (P. H. Collins, 2003).

Patricia Hill Collins (2003) discusses this important assessment of claims in Afrocentric development:

"Assessment of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values and ethics. African-Americans reject the Eurocentric, masculinist belief that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion. Rather, all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal," (p. 65).

Entre to the community members to generate knowledge through research may be permitted, but what happens to the knowledge generated and how the participants are represented are equally important and sometimes are the unspoken questions of trust. All participants were fully informed about the research process, encouraged to ask their questions, and received answers before participating in the research process. However, assessment of the research process as

being trustworthy did not end with descriptions given during the introduction process. Five of the eight couples gave summary comments during the follow-up interview that happened three to four weeks after the initial interviews while both partners were present that indicated their on-going assessments of trustworthiness of the process:

Sara: “You hit the main points; being Black, being married, communication, and your faith.”

*(FU txt)*

Rach: “This, this is—it’s good to have this.” *(referring to having copy of interview)*

Jake: “And I want to let you know that I appreciated the perspective that’s based on the questions. And that you did get through to a lot of the core.” *(FU txt)*

Isak: “But it actually gave some definition to what it is I know I sometimes do when I don’t want to deal or—and you *(researcher)* were honest about that.” *(FU txt)*

This assessment happens regardless of who the interviewer may be. I am an immigrant woman of African-descent who is Protestant Christian, and who had some familiarity with the person who contacted them about this study. However, having these overlapping reference points and my openness about the process also facilitated trust. Now I proceed to the research questions and the findings.

### **Research Question 1: How do the partners talk about collective sacred process?**

#### **Theme 1: Importance of faith**

All eight of the couples identified that their faith was most important for them. I use the word ‘sacred’ to refer to the religious and spiritual processes of the couples. Their sacred process has physical actions and accessories, such as prayer and Bible reading respectively. Yet the spiritual aspects are tangibly reflected in their commitment and is not just a way of life, it is

life, as Sena said, “I don’t know how I could BE, if you will, without having that faith and foundation.” A sentiment reflected in comments of all the participants. They emphasized an all encompassing trust in God:

Moe: My faith in God is that I can depend on Him. I can call on Him, and I have faith that He’ll answer my prayers or lead me in any direction that I need to be led in.

Orah: It means my way of life it means everything to me. ... We’d probably have less stress (*laughs*) less tension, less, you know...let Him be more and me be less. It probably would be better but it’s not bad but I just think it would be better.

Isak: “He’ll never forsake me, that there’re promises that He’s meted out just for me, and that with all—and just the way I am, God loves me for who I am and I’m starting to understand that I need to believe that I am who God says I am.”

Reba: So it helps define me as a person. So it is that word that gives me that guidance. It is who I strive to be, the majority of the day ‘cause I’m just taking it day by day, the majority of the day. I remember when I began when I became a Christian, and my brothers and my family actually held a meeting to tell me that I had changed, and how disappointed they were. ... So I feel at home when I say the name of Jesus. You know there’s a security in that.... In that sense I’m just free!

Adam: Well I would say my faith means everything to me. Because, everything I do, everything; the way I live my life my thoughts my—everything that pertains to me comes from



my faith because I grew up with my grandmother and she brought me up in the church and I didn't just go to church because they took me there. It became part of me.

Ava: Oh it's very important, that fact that I—everything I do or what I aspire to do, aspire towards anything, any goals that I have I want to know that He (*God*) approves it or He is part of it or He—it's part of His purpose for me in life.

The importance of faith was also reflected in the scale for spiritual experiences, the DSES. All the participants were able to give their feedback on the scales and in relation to their daily experiences with God, all of the couples received results indicating a 'moderate' to 'high' daily experience with God, and while some felt their 'high' score should actually be 'moderate', none had any scores indicating 'low' daily experiences with God. (Preferences of the couples for revisions in their scores that they felt did not fit their experiences are reflected in the reported questionnaire results table, Appendix A. The scoring template is Appendix B).

In discussing their faith experiences, all eight couples were able to discuss how God influences their sense of well being individually and dyadically. This function of their faith is also supported by the results of the Spiritual Well Being Scale. All the partners scored high on this scale except for Dave in couple 4. However, he also tended to score moderately on other scales but that seemed to match his understated conversation, even about getting through a difficult experience: "I think my faith there was helpful...when you might explode or get really worked up I was able to keep my cool, just pray on it." This example from Dave is one example of the comments made by the couples about how faith helps them to manage their sense of security and welfare through various life situations:

Moe: When things are going wrong, we call on Him. We rely on Him as for guidance, for help. We depend on Him basically.

Jake: Well in each of the decisions that we make there is always a choice. And how we move forward is dictated on my part by what I think is in line with our faith and how we're supposed to move forward.

Rach: We really, really both believe strongly in God's Hand on our lives and the ways in which his Hand guides the walk that we have.

Adam: Well the thing with my faith and my marriage is my faith is where I get, I should say, all of my direction. All of my direction in life, with my marriage, comes from my faith.

## **Theme 2: Active and receptive interactions with God**

The ways in which the sacred is clear and tangible in the relationships of the couples is multi-layered. It seems to manifest dyadically as a result of the partners' adherence to their faith individually and collectively. For example, Reba stated, "I truly, truly believe that if God wasn't the cable that [Isak] and I actually hold on to individually and then corporately...[there] wouldn't be marriage." The layers include active and receptive processes. All the partners expressed actively initiating contact with God to engage in sacred conversation through activities like prayer and Bible reading individually and collectively. This portion of their testimony is one of the places where the couples discussed their affection for each other. The couples expressed

romantic love as here with Isak and Reba. The couples do express mutual affection and respect in the course of their testimonies, as identified for Theme 2 of Research Question 2.

Boaz: We go to God each morning, do devotions with one another, and we pray for one another, and we try to find verses that will fit us for that day.

Ruth: This is my belief. If you are rooted and grounded in the word then you don't allow that room for the enemy to come in and wreak havoc in your marriage. That's how I feel. ... You have to get up every day and you have to pray. ... Throughout your day, everything that happens to you, you have to thank the Lord. You have to go to the Lord and pray.

Isak: I believe that that's how it was supposed to be. When God brought Eve to Adam so he would never have to be alone and her actually being a part of him, I understood that [Reba] being brought to me and becoming my wife only brought back what I have lost.

Reba: When you see certain behaviors in play. I know it's not the flesh. I know it's not me. I know it's not my husband. It can only be the submission to the Holy Spirit; the unctioining of the Holy Spirit...those things are quickly squashed in your spirit.... When you want to just be very...violent, not only physically but verbally.... When those things don't flow out of your mouth the way they used to.... What comes to my forefront is that I love this person.

The receptive processes, also discussed by all the couples, are represented in several ways. One of which is that God is in control and greater than their circumstances and they just need to allow God to move in the mysterious ways that He can. Ava provides an example of this in describing how God intervened to speak on her behalf when she and her husband experienced

a disagreement. Another receptive mode is the recognition that there are increased activities or further release of personal control that they could be doing to strengthen their interaction with God. However, their awareness of what is missing from their behaviors does not diminish their commitment to their faith. Both of these receptive faith processes are present in the comments of Jake and Rach from their follow-up interview. While their faith dictates that practitioners should practice 'letting the Lord do it' as Rach says, this is not an automatic or easy discipline. In this couple's exchange, Jake states this belief simply and though Rach struggles with it, her struggle is depicted in relationship with God. It is an active faith conversation in her life. In the case of Isak and Reba, they discuss the result of settling into 'letting the Lord' in this case facilitate their love for each other.

Ava: I made a statement or had a view about something and my husband didn't agree with me. I remember when we went to church the pastor spoke about that and he said, actually said, almost the same words that I had said (*smiling*)! ... That was God...! And [Adam] looked at me and I looked at him, and he understood that what I was saying was true.

Jose: You also more importantly have to fall back on the fundamentals of why you are a faith based person and what everything means. ... [O]bviously we pray together over food and things like that. We pray on Sunday. We pray for one another and for people and everything separately sometimes, but where we can do better as a family is probably pray more together

Jake: And if you think that direction is God-centered and God is creating a purpose and here is the purpose that you're both working towards, it's easier to let Him do it than us do it.

Rach: And so I guess that difference is significant because...I don't have the cogniscience necessarily of God walking with me all day long.... I think that that's me saying, 'God You don't have to be bothered with this, I got it.' And I think that that's the piece that I really have to be more conscious and focused about because it really...should be letting the Lord do it. Rather than my saying, 'oh, Lord, let me help you with that,' or, 'Lord, don't worry about this I got it. You could take care of somebody that really needs your immediate [help], because I'm good. I got this.' And I think that that's something that I have to continue to work on.

### **Adversity and the journey.**

Five couples discussed a surprising similarity in a theme of adversity that strengthened the couples' dyadic faith-bond. Adversity may come through general life stresses or through more intense struggles specific to the couple. The stories of two couples are represented below but this theme was present in three other couples and is revisited later in addressing the second research question. What is notable about the knowledge represented by the similarity in the stories of the following two wives is that there is a 30 year difference in the length of their marriages; Sena has been married less than a year and Seba for 31. A related sub-theme in the dyadic process that emerged from the two couples was that life together is a journey, faith gives direction:

Seba: Well your daily in and out, the daily living day by day has to be a faith journey, OK? Because everything that happens to you impacts on you; it impacts on your marriage. That's why—put it this way—if we were not believers in God I could see where it would put a stress on our marriage. Like two people and they're not thinking alike. The fact that [Dave ] and I think

alike in terms of we believe very strongly in God and we do feel that your faith impacts on your daily living. ... God is in the midst of everything.

Sena: It's a journey. And, and as you go through your relationship, there are some things that reveal themselves about your relationship or about that person that bring you together, help you to open your eyes, change you or whatever the case may be from that perspective. ... I think the challenges of life and the pressures of life the highs and the lows all of those experiences combine to kind of shape you. ... [God] puts us through fire sometimes and as much as it hurts and it's painful, it's done for a reason. It's done to help build something that you're lacking or to build you together as a couple, and our challenge is with starting a family. I think it's definitely helping us as a couple come together. ... I think it's the disappointments in life that help to bring you together as a couple. It's those hard times; those challenges, and they're there for a reason. And that's the one thing that I would say about both of us, we both see that and we both recognize that; even during tough times there's a reason. There's a reason for everything. ... So that's where the faith comes in. Trust in God is going to lead us where we need to be.

The discussion seems to indicate an evolving process that may have had a beginning but no visible end. It continually changes, becoming more nuanced over time. A poignant expression of this is presented by Dave:

Dave : My memory is starting to go, so she's my remembrance. She remembers everything. She is a very good support network for me. ... Most of all she—I think of her as a fellow Christian walking in the same path. Right? And so we share that common journey, faith journey

that we can both relate to in terms of our married lives our social lives and who our friends are and that type of thing.

The examples in this section show that the couples place a strong emphasis upon faith and consider it to be central in their lives. Their faith provides guidance for any given aspect of their individual and collective lives. It is manifested through their individual and interactional behaviors. The interactional behaviors may include God as a Person with power to act and with Whom conversation as well as conflict can occur, and not just as amorphous Spirit Who receives prayer. The physical tools minimally include the Bible, but may extend to other physical representations of symbols of their faith. From interaction to accoutrements, the processes of their religious/spiritual life occur in very clear ways for these couples. Some functions of their faith only manifest as a result of their dyadic process, such as the journey aspect and the ways in which facing life struggles as a couple deepen their relationship.

**Research Question 2: How pervasive is this application of ‘the sacred’ for them individually and dyadically, notably for the well-being and stress of their relationship?**

The couples bond in a process that is more than just physical, and to some extent, defies mundane definition, “because we didn’t create it” (Jose). However as described previously, the couples are discussing experiences to which they have attached their deepest respect and their belief that these processes that function in their relationship hold a supernatural quality. When the partners are stressed, this sacred process that is understood to be there in peaceful times is also understood to manifest in times of stress. It doesn’t necessarily have to be actively called upon because, as demonstrated by the collective testimony above, faith is laced throughout the

relationship by their collective as well as their individual commitment to their belief. “We have touches and looks that...transcend just physical intimacy but are more of a spiritual intimacy. ... I think that [unspoken] language is there or naturally develops if the two people are committed to God in their relationship” (Isak). This sentiment was echoed by other couples. Their unspoken process is attributed to One Greater than themselves, and also contributes to preserving the health of the relationship.

### **Theme 1: Intuitive awareness of God’s presence**

As discussed above the sacred process for the couples includes communication with God. However, because the individuals are in relationship with each other, they actively protect their relationship. The couple erects and maintains boundaries around the interactional space created by them to exclude negative external and internal influences that could erode their relationship. This act of creating a separate space for the couple to inhabit to which access is limited to a very special few imbues the relationship with a quality that can be considered sacred. Six of the couples talked about having protected space for the relationship.

Sara: We keep our families, their comments, whether they agree or don’t agree with us; we...don’t make them a part of our marriage or our decisions.

Moe: Yeah, we don’t let certain people; certain things come into our marriage. Actually, I was taking a young lady, [Tamar], home, one of the job personnel, just like she (*Orah*) was taking somebody home. And it got to a point...that it was bothering my wife. ... I saw that it was affecting the marriage. ...



Orah: I didn't like the idea of her using him. ...

Moe: So I'm just using that as an instance. It was starting to—not affect—but it could have been something coming into the marriage that one didn't like and I didn't want it...to affect our marriage. We try to keep a barrier for us in our marriage. *(Interaction; FU txt)*

Three of the six couples discussed the ways in which when the couples fully occupy their sacred space, their own defenses come down. They are able to relate to each other without needing the armour that tends to be generated by life stresses, exemplified by quotes from Rach and Jake. Additionally, as discussed by Sena and Jose, the spiritual nature of the relationship is more readily expressed,.

Rach: It's rare, but when it happens it's just us and, and there aren't any of the distractions....

So if we can turn off both of those things, then we have a good chance at that cocoon thing. And I like those times because they're so few.... So when we do have that cocoon thing, it is just us and it's not any of his stuff or any of my stuff.

Jake: And our orientation is based on what God has put in front of us for the two of us to be able to handle together. ... As the clear priority, she is the one that I am most trying to care for, provide for understand and protect. ... It is what makes the relationship different and special from any other. There are things that we are sharing, and timing, and the priority that only come between us.

Sena: It's a spiritual connection. ... It's not a physical manifestation of something. It's not just how he looks or how I look to him. It's just that otherworldly connection that you have that's

beyond your understanding. ... I don't know how to describe it. ... It's a different type of connection, that just draws me in...and it's that connection that we can be together without having a conversation.

Jose: I never really sat back to think about it...and probably the reason we can't define it is because we didn't create it. I think that sense of trust and understanding, again, there are things that have been fused in us, in terms of knowledge and emotion that we didn't intentionally go out and acquire; something that was breathed into us...of God's Will....

## **Theme 2: Faith gives peace to dyadic process**

Faith is evident in their testimony about their marriages and in their discussion about its role in their efforts to keep their relationships vital and long-lived. While most of their interactions are faith-based or faith informed, not all aspects of their interaction are connected to their faith. For instance, one of the dyadic processes discussed in some way by seven of the couples was that the partners would look out for each other protectively and in three of those couples, the one being protected was aware of the partner's protectiveness toward her or him. This process stemmed from genuine mutual respect and affection and cannot be strictly classified as a faith-related process though it was dyadic. The partners discuss their relational processes in marital peace-time, and also permit glimpses into the shifts their dyadic experience took during discordant moments. Four of the couples discussed the role of faith in their finding their partners. Four couples noted how faith cements their relationships. Jose who is married less than a year presents an example of how despite faith, creating unity is a work in progress.

Boaz: Well, we keep talking about how we came together, how faith brought us together and if it wasn't for God's intervention, we would have never been together. And I believe that wholeheartedly, that it was God that brought us together.

Adam: It would be that—well I am married now for thirty—38 years and if I were to get married again, it will be to the same woman. So therefore, I think that would tell you that I am totally and absolutely satisfied with my marriage and the relationship that I have with my wife. And this is from the very first day, to, to this very day. You know? No regrets whatsoever...because of my belief in God and the way I know the Word of God....

Jose: I don't care how similar you are—you're different people. You had different upbringings, and you're gonna react differently to different types of things. I mean we're both, we're both Christians, but we can argue about certain things, certain points, you know. How conservative should this be or what's your interpretation of what that doctrine means, this, that and the other? And so we're still working though that.

There were no differences in this theme between the couples with partners who were married before and those with no prior marriages. For example, Boaz who is now married for about two years is a widower who was previously married for 29 years, and Adam has been in his only marriage for 38 years.

### **Theme 3: Faith equals marriage preservation**

Above Jose presents the perspective of a first-marriage newlywed on building unity from two different people. Here, Isak who has been married 13 years and has known his wife longer than that discusses how God provides a deterring seal against the dissolution of the marital relationship. There is an implication of the couples being aware of the “dangers” to their relationship by virtue of their active faith-related strategies to help protect it. This theme of marriage preservation is addressed by six of the couples. Orah and Boaz discuss two perspectives on the issue of forgiveness. As can be seen in the quotes from these three, the couples tended toward faith-based problem solving. This was reflected in the scores on the Religious Problem Solving Scale. All of the participants except for Dave scored with a tendency to use either the collaborative coping style, which is working with God, or the deferred coping style, which is ‘letting the Lord do it.’ Both of these are religious coping styles. Dave scored with a self-directed coping style, which indicated that he tended not to lean toward God for resolving issues.

Isak: And as difficult as it has been at times because my wife and I are different people...when you're going through the things...how could I possibly sin against God by dishonoring this marriage relationship by not sticking in there and make it work?

Orah: Well since we've been married, I usually don't stay mad or silent with him as long as I used to be able to. I could go for months. I didn't care. We could be living in the same house and didn't speak to one another but since we've been married, and you know both Christian, it's different. I find I forgive a lot quicker and I'm able to move on a lot quicker. Although if

something really, really bothered me or hurt me it might be in the back of my mind a little, but I can move on now.

Boaz: I do whatever I need to do to keep my marriage together and keep it healthy. ... When we got married, we decided that in the event that we have a misunderstanding; let us not go to bed upset with each other. There have been times when we did go to bed, but the next morning, we would get up and talk about it. ... So I think it's because of my faith why I do those things. It says, 'don't let the sun go down on your wrath.'

#### **Theme 4: Underpinnings of faith surface in resolving relational stress**

##### **Sub-theme A: Unspoken process and “silent language”.**

As the couples broadened and deepened their camaraderie, they developed unspoken ways of understanding each other, referred to as “silent language” by Adam. All of the couples discussed uses of silence in their relationship. The silent language has beneficial and detrimental aspects. Six of the couples discussed silence as self-imposed, as in one partner shutting down in response to relational tension when he or she is upset. In a seventh couple, Adam and Ava, one partner would become silent because the other was tense. The use of silence seems to be independent of any kind of faith process, yet could take on a spiritual quality as indicated by Isak and Reba. When the tensions in the relationship appear to move toward anger, the role of silence is that of diffusing tension. When the emotions are closer to irritation, three couples discussed how the silent interaction of one of the partners takes on a spiteful quality. In those cases where silence is used to diffuse tensions, as discussed by six of the couples, one or both will move to a separate location or shut down, exemplified by Moe. When this type of process occurs, after

some interval, the length of which varies from one couple to another, one of the partners will pursue the other to re-establish communication. This 'chasing' process is unidirectional in three of the couples meaning one partner predominantly breaks silence and bi-directional in three.

Adam: I look and my wife's face tells me a whole lot, and visa versa I think; and that is because I think it comes like that because of the length and the amount of years we live together and we have what I describe as a silent language there between us.

Isak: We have touches and looks that are—that they kinda transcend just physical intimacy but are more of a spiritual intimacy. ... I think that [silent] language is there or naturally develops if the two people are committed to God in their relationship. I think it becomes a natural by-product of the union that God brings into it being that third strand there. I think that's the element the cohesiveness that God is being the main strand in that three-cord brings.

Reba: We're thinking the same—because we—we have spent so much time together that he knows how I think and I know how he's thinking and when we see something, we'll look at each other (*laughing*) and it's like, "yeah!" You know that kind of a thing. So it's...I wanna say twins. You know how they say twins finish each other's sentences and because they're so connected; and that's only the bond that keeps us together, which is God.

Moe: I want to say if we've had an argument or something because of stress or finances or whatever the case may be, we'll just have to cool down or whatever, and then later on, we just go back to communicating as...we don't let that become a grudge. ... 'You're not speaking to me,

I'm not speaking to you, for days and weeks at a time.' Sometimes that could happen here, but, it doesn't go on long. ... Cool down, meaning that, you're in one room, I'm in another.

**Sub-theme B: Faith and stress in the interaction.**

All of the couples discussed their experiences of bringing faith into the moment of discord and all identified varied degrees of facility in doing so. The couples discussed the difficulty of stopping in the moment spanning the spectrum from remembering to use faith strategies after the discordant moment, to struggling to use faith-based strategies to resolve the tensions, to having moments of God intervening without conscious effort. Isak and Reba discuss their experience of God stepping in and reversing a moment of extreme relational tensions. In reviewing their scores on the Perceived Stress Scale, both partners in couple 1, Orah and Moe, scored moderately on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and their conversations indicated their current life was somewhat stressful for them. In couples 2, 4, and 5 the husbands (Boaz, Dave, and Isak respectively) scored "moderate" and the wives (Ruth, Seba, and Reba) scored "low" regarding stress. In couples 3 and 6 the husbands, Jake and Adam, scored "high" and the wives, Rach and Ava, scored "moderate". In couples 7 and 8 the husbands, Abe and Jose, scored as "low" and the wives, Sara and Sena, scored as "moderate". With couple 2, it was interesting that Ruth scored as having "low" stress and Boaz as having "moderate" because both believed that Ruth tends to worry and Boaz does not. In the follow-up discussion, we considered the possibility that because Ruth looks to her husband to address difficult concerns, she then feels less stress and Boaz feels more, and that the scores reflected this possibility; so concerns about the scores is not reflected in the recorded scores.

Sena: You might think, “OK this is not the Christian way to kind of approach this” or “what I said wasn’t probably right.” Maybe step back for a minute. That type of thing. But once we’re, I call it ‘in the lock-jaw moment,’ I think we have difficulty seeing [and] being able to say, “OK, let’s take a moment, let’s pray, let’s get the Bible.... I mean it’s hard to do that. I think we both struggle with that. ...

Jose: I would say the same thing. I think in order to bring God into the picture you have to be cognizant, number one, that He’s there. And if you’re so heated and preoccupied with what somebody says, it’s not—He’s not fully in front of you or you’re not able to immediately seek His guidance. So you need either a cooling off period or you need something to trigger you, and sometimes it could be during the heat of the moment if one person steps up and says—is able to diffuse it in some sort of way; and that’s hard.

*(Interaction; FU txt)*

Isak: I think there’s been one time where a spirit got in here it just got so crazy that [Reba] wanted to hit me. [Reba] always wants to hit me not always wants to hit me but I think [Reba] comes from a more violent background than I do and the tendency used to be for her to exercise that more than me. And I think that was the most intense period. That only happened once at that level. It hasn’t happened since. ...

Reba: When we got to that place it was for me like somebody had taken a blindfold off my eyes [saying], ‘what are you doing?’ ... ‘Cause we were both at the edge. We were [thinking] ‘this is it!’ I don’t know about you (*to Isak*), but for me it was like everything that had ever [been] wrong was right there. ... It was pivotal at that moment....



Isak: I think when you submit your life wholeheartedly I'm not saying perfectly, but when you really give your life to Christ. I do believe there's divine intervention that has nothing to do with us asking or praying on it. God just steps in. It's time to step in. ... That just happens because I believe God knows our hearts so there are times when God has to intervene.

*(Interaction; FU txt)*

The data in themes 1 to 3 showed that when the couple is experiencing relational health, the faith-based aspects of the relationship are stronger. When the interactional process is relatively peaceful, as in Theme 1, the couples discuss ways in which they protect their relationship, and more faith-related process is incorporated, as in Theme 2. They use their faith to help preserve the marriage as noted in Theme 3. Healthy boundaries are created around the relationship and it is protected. Within those bounds the couple is able to encounter God, drop their 'outside' defenses and experience the spiritual qualities of their relationship created out of the protected unity and communion. Faith plays a strong role in couples' process during times of peace and in its protection. The men are strong and supportive partners with their wives. Spiritual maturity and adamant use of faith is important for both and highly valued by both. The clear message is that it takes two committed Christians to make the marriage work—that they work on it together.

When tensions begin to increase as described in theme 4, there is a greater sense of struggle to use more faith-based processes. Once the couples began to experience relational discord, the interactions between them shift and silence was used consistently across couples as a means to reduce rising tensions. In moments of mild irritation silence might be used, but then it could be characterized as having a taunting quality. Again, if the dominant emotion is anger, one

or both partners may shut down; adopt a stance of stoic silence as stated by Ava, “Somehow, if he’s mad I just keep silent. If I’m mad, he keeps silent.” When they were in the middle of a discordant moment, the couples experienced the greatest inconsistency in applying their faith to resolve matters, however at least one couple discussed a process of spontaneous divine intervention when their tensions edged toward common couple violence, and brought them back to a place of peace.

**Research Question 3: What aspects of the partners’ mutual religious/spiritual interactions are functionally employed by the couples to address their relational discord?**

**Theme 1: Marital triad**

In the earlier collective testimony at least six of the couples emphasized that God is omnipresent in their lives. In spite of this, partners in three couples also described struggles with retaining versus relinquishing autonomy and control to the omnipotent God of their faith as concerns their circumstances. Additionally, six couples discussed their use of activities (prayer) and tools of their faith (Bible) as means for applying their faith to their circumstances and of deepening their relationship with God. However, when stress moved the couple into relational discord, all of the couples tend to use silence and some form of separation, either physical or emotional, to de-escalate interactional tensions. The faith process that seemed to be consistently at work (in peace, stress or discord) with six of the couples was their incorporation of God into their relationship as a third partner. Doing so changed the relationship from being a marital couple to a marital triad. God was often referred to as a Person, even while understanding God as being Spirit. God as a member of the marital triad reduced the tendency toward rigid polarization during marital discord. God became fictive kin, defined as an extended family

member, in a role that was simultaneously wise elder and divine mediator. An example of this is when Ruth discussed God's advice to her toward resolving a concern with her husband; "while I was in church, the Lord told me that this is something I have to deal with."

This experience made me think of Bowenian theoretical construction of triangulation and de-triangulation to best explain regulation of the marital triad (Butler & Harper, 1994).

Polarization was reduced with the partners because God maintains a relationship with each partner (Griffith, 1986). The process was facilitated as a result of the couples' collective beliefs and "seeing their relationship through divine perspective facilitates their stepping out of their emotionally reactive position [resulting in a shift of] their focus to their marital system with renewed resources for reconciliation," (Butler & Harper, Differentiation and Detriangulation section, para. 5).

In a healthy relationship, God is the differentiated, de-triangulated, person who maintains a relationship with each partner of the couple, through neutrality God promotes responsibility of the individual for the marriage. The connections and interactions are both dyadic combinations and systemically triadic. The couple regulates their relationship as a result of the marital triad, taking responsibility for "their own issues, enlisting God's help to enhance their own work of reconciliation and resolution," (Butler & Harper, 1994, Differentiation and Detriangulation section, para. 6) In an unhealthy relationship God is not neutral and is used as a conduit to avoid and responsibility in various ways. God is seen as aligned with one partner in opposition to the other, creating an imbalance of power whereby the disempowered partner must submit. This may cause distrustfulness, anger and/or bitterness on the part of the marginalized partner who then instigates coercive interactions.

In the following quotes, Orah and Moe are an example of how God is placed in a priority position in the relationship automatically. Ava exemplifies the way God is personified and incorporated into the relationship. Isak and Reba present the Biblical/spiritual underpinnings of the marital triad and Jose talks about God's entry into the relationship, through the irrevocable vows spoke in the sanctification ceremony of marriage.

Both No, He's first. *(both spoke simultaneously without first consulting each other or pausing to think about the response)*

Orah: First—

Moe: First.

Orah: —we're second and third *(laughs)*

Moe: Yeah.

Orah: He's here first. We're second and third.

Moe: He's first. He's first. ...

Orah: So I guess that's why he feels strongly about 'can't walk away.' But I mean it's not really not part of my thought process as far as leaving, no matter how mad I may get at him or with him, get mad with him. The thought of leaving is not really one of the options. ...

Moe: Yeah. Actually somebody told me that it shouldn't be in my—divorce should not be in my vocabulary. *(Interaction; FU txt)*

Ava: I believe in God, and that I believe that He is a person that I can relate to that He is more powerful than any individual I've known or anybody on the earth; and He wants to interact with me and He loves us and He wants us to have that relationship with Him. ... We have a saying

[back home] that marriage is three persons, so in my eye it means that it's two of us and God is in the middle of it. ... What He thinks and what He is revealed through His Word. ... So, I'm always asking the Lord for—I'm always praying—I 'm always asking the Lord for guidance.

Isak: What we got out of that [movie] was not her and I as strands adding God as a third strand...[we] realized that God brought us in and allowed us to intertwine with Him to make that bond. So rather than us bringing Him in He brought us in. ... The Holy Spirit brought that to us and we came into agreement with the Holy Spirit. ... I think that's the element, the cohesiveness that God is being the main strand in that three-cord brings.

Reba: You cannot be married alone. And I have to say my husband works on our relationship; as I do. So I can't say, "I'm doing this all myself." No. It's not that. And he has his own relationship with God and I see God working in his life as God is working in mine.

Jose: We've entered into this union and You (*God*) played a big role in this and You're going to play perhaps the biggest role in it moving forward. And we know we have to do certain things as well, because none of this is gonna continue to be what it should be unless we follow in Your Son's footsteps and that's what helps us keep going. ... I think when you take a vow like that, that's huge.

The participants in this study were examples of healthy Christian relationships. God was triangulated in their relationships in positive ways. When the partners were stressed, either individually or collectively, they engaged God in conversation, requested assistance and attributed positive outcomes to His intervention. When situations were negative for various

reasons, the partners affirmed God's sovereignty over all things and trusted in Him to see them through. Sena and Dave provide examples of this. Gottman (1994) identifies four relational behaviors that can derail a relationship. None of those qualities, criticism, defensiveness, contempt or stonewalling (Gottman, 1994) were identified in the experiences discussed by these participants. In fact, when one of the partners did shut down, the other would engage in the complementary behavior of 'chasing' to restore positive interaction. Moreover, the couples didn't avoid responsibility for bad decisions or anyone's individual role in an argument; neither did they blame God for their troubles. God is the Shoulder big enough to bear the burdens they cannot contain, and the One who keeps relational discord from settling into polarized war zones. God also is the Source of Hope for positive change.

Sena: I think our faith is critical at this time as we're thinking about starting a family. We have some personal challenges from that perspective and like I said, [Jose] has been a rock and a strength for me...to constantly remind me...saying, "God has a plan for us. We may not know what it is, but God has a plan for us."

Dave: Stress is really (*sighs*). Sometimes we're at each other's throats because of stress, but then, when the stress comes through it means we're not relying on our faith, you know, relying on God; because if we relied on God, we would have faith that He'll see us through. ... So, instead of being stressed out because this didn't work out this way or that didn't work out that way, we see it as, 'it's God's Will'.

Discussing the Dyadic Coping Inventory (DCI) here provides an interesting contrast to the data on triadic process above. The DCI is an instrument designed to assess the tendency of the partners to rely upon each other as resources to manage life stressors. It has five subscales, so the different subscale results of this instrument are integrated predominantly in this section. A total of five couples had concerns that their scores on the subscales did not match their personal and mutual perceptions about their process and they preferred to have those concerns reflected in score modifications, which are highlighted in Appendix A. Three couples had modifications for their scores in one subscale each; one couple had modifications for two subscales; one couple had modification in four of the subscales. One explanation for the concerns could be responder bias in the questions. That is, the participants could guess at a best response based upon the questions but that response did not necessarily fit their personal perceptions. Another possible explanation for the concern in the scores could be that the inventory is dyadic and one of the results that emerged from the interviews is that at least six of these eight couples use an active triadic interaction, inclusive of God. That might cause some shift in the individual's preferred response.

“By partner”—this was interpreted for the couples to be how the person completing the questionnaire assessed his or her partner's tendency to ask for his or her needs. Four couples scored ‘high’ on this subscale, the remaining four couples were a mix of ‘moderate’ to ‘high’ with some modification in the results to reflect the preferences of the couples (highlighted in Appendix A, scoring template is Appendix B).

“In common”—this was interpreted for the couples to be how they felt they worked together to address their needs as a couple, were they “rowing together”. Five couples had ‘high’ scores on this subscale and remaining couples were a blend of ‘moderate’ to ‘high’ with modified scoring.

“Self-evaluation”—how effective the couples felt they were in their dyadic coping process, i.e. in being mutual, or both using practices that are inclusive. Again in this subscale, five couples had ‘high’ scores on this subscale and remaining couples were a blend of ‘moderate’ to ‘high’ with modified scoring.

## **Theme 2: Faith-based strategies**

The faith-based strategies include prayer and employing biblical tenets. Six couples mentioned using the Bible, of that two specifically mentioned the scripture of not letting the sun go down on one’s anger. Other Bible references varied among the couples. The single tenet most identified by the couples (three) was forgiveness, noted as motivation for de-escalation when one partner owns his or her personal shortcomings or otherwise repents. Other strategies from the Bible were used to varying degrees. Five couples specifically identified prayer. The majority of the couples used multiple strategies. For example, Orah and Moe both talked about the scripture referring to anger and Sena discusses use of forgiveness and repentance

Orah: You want to keep that anger, you just dwell on it every day, or every minute of the day, then, (*brief pause*), saying hey—don’t leave room for God to come in, heal the wound and, and, and help you to move on. You have to move on in your mind and in your heart else-wise, you get stuck and you stay there that’s how people break up. You can talk yourself into anything.

Moe: mmhm

Orah: Yeah! (*laughs*) ... ‘don’t let the sun go down on your anger,’ I’m probably messing up the verse. You know you’re not supposed to go to bed mad with one another. Women honor their



husbands, and husbands are supposed to love their wives as themselves. There are things in there (*Bible*) and I know that he tries hard to live it and be that person. (*Interaction; FU txt*)

Sena: I think the faith part of it is, OK, forgiveness. If you feel the other person has done you wrong, you need to kind of let that go and visa versa, and also be Christian enough to know, if I've done wrong to my brother I need to apologize. ... The Word says we need to clear the air with our brother or sister...so I think that helps us when there is discord and...learning to let things go. And if we say we're sorry, if the person apologizes, accepting it and not trying to hold it over the person's head for days and hours and that type of thing. So, I think that's what helps guide it, but we can do better (*laughs*). We can always do better...that's always been a challenge.

### **Theme 3: Reach out or not reach out.**

When it came to making a decision about reaching out to others if tensions became seemingly too much for the couple to address by themselves, only one couple stated a strong preference not to talk to others, but if they did these partners would attempt to connect to their pastor. Of the remaining seven couples, four couples would speak to their pastors without concern. For one couple it would depend upon the sensitivity of the pastor, for one it was no and for the last the response was split because each grew up in a different church and had opposite experiences in connecting to supportive clergy. In reaching out to friends or counselor, four said they would talk to counselors; the remainder would speak to either counselors or friends. In summary here, the majority of the couples would reach out for assistance in some way if they could not address an issue themselves and the preference would be to connect to clergy. This is

supported by the positive/negative coping subscale of the DCI which indicated all the couples had a stronger tendency to use positive coping styles than to use negative coping styles.

#### **Theme 4: General strategies**

While all the couples interactively used faith-based strategies to resolve relational discord, they also incorporated other general strategies. These strategies were not necessarily faith-based, but often were faith informed. Some of these strategies were: compromise, respect and communication, and agreeing to disagree. These strategies were mentioned more frequently than other general strategies. In the following examples, Ruth provides commentary on compromise and here it is not coupled with faith language. Ava provides information on respect and communication, also without accompanying faith language, as does Rach on agreeing to disagree. Here I report on the subscale of the DCI which is coping “by oneself”. This was interpreted for the couples as whether the partner completing the questionnaire felt he or she asked for his or her needs from his or her partner so it was a self-assessment, and all the couples scored moderate and high and two changed their scores.

Ruth: We compromise, and I think that’s another thing, you gotta learn how to compromise.

People don’t want to do that.

Ava: I think you have to have that mutual respect and understanding that he has a point of view. I don’t try to beat it down. He doesn’t try to beat my point of view down. ... I think one of the things, too, is that communication is vital. You have to communicate your feelings, and

sometimes we might talk about something and I might not say anything about it. But we always have thing—this way about us. We always like to talk. You know? We're like friends.

Rach: I try to have it play a role because I think that at the end of the day there are some things, some topics where we're just not gonna have a meeting of the minds. It's not gonna happen. But if we can somehow find a way to learn to just peacefully co-exist on it, and agree to disagree, and just find that nice, comfortable place where we both can be. I think that's the thing—that's the way to get through it.

Investigating the functional use of religious/spiritual processes to address relational discord revealed that the majority (six) of the couples used a triadic process rather than a dyadic one. They incorporated God as an active partner in the relationship. This resulted in some interesting feedback from the participants where several felt their results did not match their mutual evaluations of their own process. A question regarding why some of the DCI results did not match the couples experiences could be that the DCI reflects dyadic process and the couples used an active triadic process. In keeping with an active religious/spiritual interactive process, the majority of the couples used predominantly faith-based strategies. If they reached out for added support, they would predominantly connect to clergy, and they did use general strategies that were not necessarily faith-based, though some were faith-informed (not presented above).

### **Revisiting the Research Contexts**

At this point data that reflects contextual issues of this research also discussed in the literature review. This data emerged in the initial interviews, as part of the queries to better

understand the role of faith in the lives of the participants. One of the scales, the IRRS-b, generated objective data regarding racial stress. The IRRS-b information will be integrated with this portion of the discussion because of the unique ways the results of that scale adds insights. The contexts discussed are: the intersection of race-ethnicity and marital stress, racial-ethnic stress, factors within the African American community that contribute to partner violence and the benefits from the pulpit.

### **Context A: Race-ethnicity and marital stress**

The first context discussed in this section is the intersection of African American race-ethnicity and marital stress. Race-ethnic stress was discussed as a possible contributing factor for IPV resulting from racial-ethnic social inequalities, so the data on the couples' perceptions on the impact of race-ethnicity on their stress levels bears examination. These questions were asked to elicit data related to race parallel to the race-related stress scale, and were asked in the original interview. Though almost every couple could identify awareness of racial inequality or a race-ethnic related incident, almost none of the couples identified race as contributing to the stress they experience as a couple for various reasons. This is summarized in Table 4, preceding comments from the partners. Four complete couples reported no race-ethnic stress on the marriage. One partner in each of the four remaining couples had the same report. In the next section the intersection of race-ethnicity and faith is presented, followed by the integration of the IRRS-b results. The discussion of the faith-race/ethnicity intersection may speak partially to why so many of the partners stated they were not affected by racial stress enough for it to affect their marriage:

**Table 4: Race-ethnicity and marital stress**

	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>
1	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Being Black is stressful, but makes the family closer (strengthens the marriage)
2	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Being Black creates some stress
3	Being Black creates some stress	Race doesn't affect couple stress
4	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Race doesn't affect couple stress
5	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Being Black creates some stress
6	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Race doesn't affect couple stress
7	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Race doesn't affect couple stress
8	Race doesn't affect couple stress	Race doesn't affect couple stress

Moe: Well it, it doesn't really affect us. ... I guess the circle that we are in, we don't see too much of the prejudice that a lot of couples would see. [It] doesn't really affect us, our marriage as far as stress is concerned.

Orah: It's a heavy burden. You know. Being Black in America is good, it's bad, its' everything! But—I wouldn't change it for me personally. ... I wouldn't want to be of another race or nationality and that's only because I am Black, so, I have no—nothing else to refer back to as far as that goes but I wouldn't say there have been many advantages. Although, I guess, for some there have been advantages. I just like being Black. ... It makes us closer, brings us closer, then makes family itself closer because we're all on the same page so when we're dealing with things it makes us closer.

*(Interaction; FU txt)*

Dave : I consider myself fortunate in the sense that I went to an all, practically all white school. In [my state]; but did not experience any patent and outright prejudice. ... This is back at the early fifties.

Seba: I grew up in the South. But even in that small town—and they were very much about Black and White, I never felt discriminated against. When I came to [this state], and I've been in [this state] since [the fifties]. And I came to [this state] when I was, like, [a child]. Now I am 62, and I have never felt any type of discrimination.

Abe: It's rough but I don't make it stressful. I just keep doing what I do and try to avoid these negative things. You know? Just keep moving. ... 'Cause it's something you will never change. I don't think you will ever change it.

Sara: Well stress, to me, is not like stress in the world. Stress to me is balancing motherhood, being a wife and being back in school.

Jose: I have not experienced all of the negativity that I hear and see people on TV or heard people with experienced certain things. ... I'm the type of person that—unless it's outright and just really, really annoying, I may not even notice. But I'm not naïve you know. I know it happens.

Sena: I don't know that we have—we experience stress from being Black per se. ... I don't know, that's like saying I'm stressed because I'm a woman. I think I get more stress from that. You know the female-male type of dichotomy in the role of marriage, in the relationship; the

woman does a lot of the work in the house. So I think that's more of the stress, more so than me being Black.

### **Context B: Racial-ethnic stress and faith**

It is possible that the experiences presented relating to racial-ethnic experiences are moderated by faith. Five of the couples also talked about faith as mitigating racial stress for them, and almost all of the participants identified having long individual faith-based backgrounds and as stated in the above review, religion and spirituality have been demonstrated to provide salutary benefits. The comments of Jake, Rach, and Isak provide some experiential context. The Index of Race-Related Stress scale will then be discussed.

Jake: Black people have endured terrorist acts for hundreds of years. Our faith is what allows us to know that 'no weapons formed will harm us,' and of the ability to take the blows or take the bumps but in the morning it'll be all over, so you have to keep—keep trudging along.

Rach: Now as Christians, I'll say for me, I haven't known a lot of married couples that actually practice the faith. I know—I've known a lot of married women whose husbands pulled up in front of the church to pick them up on Sundays, but they weren't a part of it. ... I wish that there were more Black couples who were actually Christians together. ... Everything is so fractured. So I wish there were more of us trying to do this.

Isak: I never look at things as—with color. Color issues come at me. I don't look out at those kind of things. I think White folks go through the same things that Black folks go through. ...

The fact that God is a source of dealing, which has nothing to do with 'so-so' socio-economics. I think people of faith tend to lean on their spiritual relationship with God more.

The Index of Race-Related Stress—brief version (IRRS-b) consists of three subscales; cultural, institutional and individual race-related stress.

The definitions of institutional and individual racism are historically and socially self-evident. Not so for cultural racism, so it is defined here. Cultural racism is upholding one culture as superior to another (Utsey, 1999). The cultural aspect of race-related stress stems from an awareness of this kind of dominant-subordinate process, for example, Ava in couple 6 stated, “they tried all how to make me feel that, you know, something was wrong with you—with me, and that I could not aspire to anything, I can’t, I can’t do anything. And it, it was stressful.”

The moderate scores were interpreted simply as “some stuff happens” on the job but not necessarily all the time, and that individually they feel situations may be racially charged but didn’t feel it all the time. The scores for Institutional racism was “low” or “0” for five couples and the wife of couple 3; moderate for 2 couples and high for the husband of couple 3. The scores for individual racism were moderate to low for all couples except couple 2 and Sena in couple 8. The scores for cultural racism were interesting. Both partners in couples 1, 2, and 7 scored “high”, both partners in couples 4 and 6 scored moderate, and the partners in couples 3, 5, 8 had mixed scores of “moderate” and “high” for cultural race-related stress.

In the interviews, two couples discussed the impact of racism in their lives; 3 and 6. Three couples stated they are not currently affected by racism in any negative way; couples 4, 7, and 8. In the remaining 3 couples (1, 2, and 5) the couples split along gender lines with the women noticing varying degrees of racism and the men refuting its impact. Among the couples who say they are not affected by racism, in their discussions both partners in couples 7 and 8



spontaneously identified recent incidents of racism or race-related issues in the broader community, as did all the husbands in the split couples. I surmise two possibilities as to why this might be the case in this study, that though these individuals can identify racial concerns in their broader communities, they can refute its impact upon themselves.

1. It is a protective coping mechanism to compartmentalize the personal impact of racism
2. Notably for the men, there may be an additional mechanism of externalizing stress. Boaz in couple 2 says, “I don’t worry about anything that I don’t have any control over.” Isak for couple 5 says, “I haven’t personally internalized stress; inwardly I’m still moving and grooving.”

However, when the above sets of IRRS-b data are compared with the individual interviews both of which were discussed at the follow-up meetings with all the couples, some interesting findings emerged. For instance all the couples, whether they felt they experienced racism or not, scored “moderate” to “high” on cultural racism. This means that while the conversations of couples 4, 7, and 8 stated they were not affected by racism, all scored “moderate” to “high” for experience of cultural racism, and scored “moderate” for experiences of individual racism with the wife, Seba, and husband, Abe, of couples 4 and 7 respectively; Sena in couple 8 scored “high” on that subscale. Looking at the husbands in couples 1,2, and 5 who state they are not affected by racism, couple 1 husband scored “moderate” for institutional and individual racism; Boaz in couple 2 scored “moderate” for experience of institutional and “high” for experience of individual racism; Isak in couple 5 scored “moderate” on experience of individual racism. Again, all couples scored “moderate” to “high” on experience of cultural racism. To explain these contradictions, I surmise that possibly the way the questions are phrased stimulates:

1. Memories of the reader causing him or her:
  - a. to think about past personal experiences that may not be currently valid for that individual
  - b. to recall the experience of another imparted through conversation or media
2. Increased awareness of cultural tension and societal inequities
3. Responder bias, where the reader responds according to what is believed to be the preferred answer to a question

I found it interesting that so many of the people said their personal historical experience was not overtly marked with racist experiences. I, not the participants, wondered about two primary reasons for this. First, that it truly is possible for a person of color to exist in the United States without experiences of racial-ethnic assault. However, several of those reporting minimal race-ethnic tensions, also stated they chose not to dwell on that type of negativity. This response then raised the second possibility wherein race-ethnic related experiences were compartmentalized. For example, Isak says, “I’ve been able to deal in a world where, maybe it’s just because I’m in a very comfortable space or on a comfortable plain where I understand that this is my job and that’s what I do, as long as I get positive results, if there’s something else going on in the background, I don’t—I’m not, I’m not aware of it.” If that was the case it was possible that the impact of negative racial-ethnic related experiences were automatically minimized for self-protection, which is a racial-ethnic coping strategy. Here too, faith-based and faith-informed strategies were used by the participants to get through any difficulties that did emerge related to race-ethnicity. The salutary benefits of faith may have countered the negative

impacts of racial-ethnic assaults, and enabled participants to live their lives without that negative influence. This may be why several couples stated race-ethnic concerns did not factor into any of their relationship stress. Hence, racial-ethnic stress was not identified as a primary stressor though it is acknowledged as having some corollary.

### **Context C: African American community and contributing factors for IPV**

Based on the participants' own feedback, race-ethnicity does not seem to be a notable factor in the couples' experience of stress. The participants in this study are mentally and emotionally, socially, and economically healthy couples. They are compatible, have enjoyed a 'good' life together, and are committed Christians. They are not angry or 'out to get even' and do not fit racial/ethnic stereotypes. Four participants (Isak, Jake, Dave and Rach) discussed racial/ethnic stress and relationships in the follow-up interviews. They spontaneously acknowledged their own thoughts about factors that contributed to partner violence within the African-American community. The issues identified may occur in other populations and trigger partner violence; nonetheless all of the participants' theories are specific to their own experiences and observations of issues within the African American community. This information is presented here for the insight it provides: Rach and Isak theorize that religious/spiritual imbalances in marriages where one partner, predominantly the wife, attending church regularly when her husband doesn't, as being a configuration she had seen result in IPV and that gender misperceptions contribute to IPV. Dave theorized about underdeveloped emotional language in African American men.

**Issue 1: Religious/spiritual relationship imbalances.**

Rach: I've known a lot of married women whose husbands pulled up in front of the church to pick them up on Sundays, but they weren't a part of it. Their husbands weren't coming to pick them up because they are coming from another church, no they've been home all day and now they've come to pick them up and so they don't really have an understanding of what it is that their wife is coming home and saying. So it's interesting to me when you talk about domestic violence, those are the instances where I've seen it more where that husband that, that's not part of the faith community is angry about either this pastor what he's saying, or this Jesus, and that's a source of anger.

Isak: I think there're so many little things that can be cancers to marriage relationships. Any single issue can just fester into something that could rip a marriage apart I think the enemy uses every trick in the book to do just that. I have a lot of people I interact with. When they tell me that they're not getting along or they're looking to separate and it just breaks my heart to hear that, especially if we're Christians. If one is practicing [faith] more than the other....

**Issue 2: Gender misperceptions.**

Isak: Men are at fault, but women are at fault too for thinking their men are construction projects that 'he's just not getting it, and I'm getting frustrated and I don't want to deal with this anymore.'

Rach: Always tryin' to make him better.

Jake: Yeah, so that's something we definitely have to talk about. You don't have to make me better. That's your home training that I want to deprogram, especially not when there's a conflict. When there's a conflict between the two of us that's not the time to make me better.

Right? It's like there's a conflict that you and I together have to deal with. There. So let's deal with that. ... To follow that analogy (*of naturally straightening a bent plant*) you just have to move it so that the sun is where you wanted to grow 'cause it grows towards the sun.

Rach: Still a process though. It doesn't happen tomorrow.

Jake: Right. But that's at different distinction. It's a big distinction which is—

Rach: Like what?

Jake: —The other thing that you're talking about is you doing it. What I'm talking about is God doing it. So if you turn that plant so that God is over here and that plant is growing towards and it just grows that way, you don't have to get the stick. You don't have to get the twine.

Rach: Alright.

Jake: You don't have to experiment and say, 'ooh these leaves are dying, have to prune those.' That's not your job, in making up a man. Right? Somewhere along the process we're both evenly yoked and we built each other up; but at the onset if you walk into the situation with 'you gotta make a man better or you gotta build him up,' then definitely, it's a handicap at least. I don't know if it's damaging but it would seem to be a handicap with regards to what you're expecting and you don't even communicate that. It becomes a nonverbal assumption so that as you're acting, you're acting under that premise. The man doesn't know you're acting under that premise so he's just responding to what you say at face value, and then when he gets to a point where you actually slip up and say, 'I'm trying to make you better,' pop! That's when domestic violence comes in. *(Interaction; FU txt)*

**Issue 3: Underdeveloped emotional language.**

Dave : When I dig into the facts behind the incidents that led to [partner violence], the pattern that emerged in my mind was that the male was unhappy with the situation but didn't know how to in fact deal with that unhappiness except with violence, physical violence. In addition when I'm dealing with men's issues with respect to a men's ministry I see the same inability of men to communicate clearly what they're feeling. ... And I find that is so true among Black men wherever I meet them; it's difficult for them to communicate on emotional levels, on things that really are bothering them.

I        Why do you think that is?

Dave : I don't know. Sometimes it's the macho thing or they don't know how to verbalize. They don't feel comfortable doing that and they'd just rather, "let's just sit with it." Sometimes it just gets—spills over into...very bad behavior.

**Issue 4: Questionable common unity.**

An interesting insight regarding the role of biological and fictive mothers emerged from the interviews. Jake and Isak talked about what they learned from their mothers. They learned about being responsible men, about commitment and not to take marital vows lightly. This contrast is what Rach learned from the church mothers she knew when she was younger. The older women, considered to be "church mothers," is a fictive kinship reference, meaning those who can be seen as extended family in the church, and based on generational differences they are respected as 'elder-mothers.' While the men were learning about the gravity of marital commitment, the women who knew these church mothers were instructed that men were construction projects. Rach and Orah wives expressed similar perspectives, but the more detailed discussion is represented below.

***My mother.***

Jake: My mother was very adamant about that as we were growing up and she [said], “well you know once you have a wife, you’ve got to forsake everybody else; that’s including your mother, including everybody else.” And I [thought], “whatever, mom. I’m sure there’s room for more than just one person for someone who loves me and knows my totality...she can love all of us and we don’t have to forsake all of you guys to prove that I love my wife.” So that’s—that’s the original part of it and the second part is as you, in the vows also as you become one; as you vow to unify. Marriage; my right arm is your right arm and anything that hurts you hurts me.

Isak: I lived with my mother for about—my mother died when I was about twenty-three, I think. I lived with my mother maybe two years my entire life. Raised by everybody else, wolves, everybody, just raised by anybody. One of the most important things my mother gave me was the importance of commitment. She told me once you make a commitment to a thing, no matter what happens...your word, as a man is your commitment; and once you make that commitment, no matter how detrimental you think or it could be it’s a done deal. You can’t break your commitment. ‘Cause if you do, you’re dishonoring yourself as a man. My mother told me that. And two years I lived with her. And I carry that to this day.

***Church mother***

Rach: I definitely got that, that perspective from inside the church, from the older women talking about their husbands and basically, they didn’t say this but in my grown-up mind now translating what I heard when I was little, they were basically saying that husbands, “they don’t know nothin’. They don’t have but half a brain in their heads. And so you have to be the one to

fix them and train them because they don't know anything otherwise." And that's what I got in the church, which is kind of interesting because of the church being as patriarchal as it is, yet the women kind of coming up with this very womanist notion that, "oh, they're so stupid poor things. We let them be in charge and think that, that they're smart. But they're just as dumb as can be. And so honey, you got to just train 'em you know, you gotta." And I share this story with some of the young women that I know that the old women used to say, "sometimes honey you have to make a man. You know you girls coming up, you get so fixed on finding a man that has this education, that job, and this car and da-da-da-da-da. But sometimes honey you just have to make yourself a man. If there is a man and you think maybe he has a little potential, but he's not doing anything. You just gotta scoop him up and you turn him around. You make something out of him. 'cause otherwise, he'll just be lost. If you see something you just have to make him, like an old lump of clay. Put him on the Lord's potter's wheel and you make yourself a man. And that's how you'll have a husband. If you're waiting for a husband to come along that's already formed, girl, you're gonna be waiting all your life." And those are the kind of things that just were said over and over and over to us from the time I could understand. That's what the older women would say in the church.

It is important to contextualize this quote within the womanist tradition of resistance to oppression, of which patriarchy is one form:

Conflict did not always take the form of assertive, direct action; rather it was acted out through traditions enacted to resist marginalization and silencing. The dominant culture's pressure to regularize had a devastating effect on African-American Christian women. They fought back by establishing traditions which reflected the importance they attached to strength and self-reliance. The patriarchy of the black church has never been peaceful. The content of that patriarchy—a patriarchy that can be labeled ambivalent in its various



expressions—has been severely modified by the persistent tradition of conflict that black women have maintained within black religious structures. ... In interpreting any conflicts with African-American religious traditions...it is critically important to remember that they take place in organizational settings where the operating metaphor and ideology for human relations is family. ... Throughout the history of black church women, one can find significant expression of their opposition to total patriarchy. (Gilkes, 2001, p. 108)

#### **Context D: Does church help?**

A final contextual issue discussed here relates to my initial comments on faith being a strengths-based resource in the African American community. That fact is supported by the data in this research that these couples would prefer by majority to utilize clergy supports if needed. The question remains whether that preference is grounded in tradition or in the knowledge that sound information and support can be obtained from the clergy regarding relational discord in couples. When asked if their pastors discussed domestic violence from the pulpit, the responses were mixed. This was notable because the majority of the couples stated that domestic violence was not preached from the pulpit or if they remembered the last time it was preached, said it was more than a year previously. As can be seen in Table 5, on domestic violence teachings from the pulpit, at least one partner in five couples stated domestic violence information is not preached about from the pulpit, or did not recall. The partners in couples 3 and 8 each attended different churches. Partners in couples 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8 were able to identify specific domestic violence definition and/or prevention information learned from the pulpit. No one could identify a single sermon devoted solely to domestic violence:

Adam: When you hear something and you hear it again and again, people start to listen. But when you hear it one time and you don't hear it again until somebody kills somebody down the road, it doesn't stick—it doesn't stay....

**Table 5: What couples hear – IPV**

What couples hear: Pulpit preaching about IPV

	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>
1	Not taught from the pulpit until violent incident in celebrity couple; then, should not be in anyone's marriage, men don't put your hands on women	Yes, maybe in the past 2 years; generally addresses comments to the men
2	Yes, specific information	Not very much
3	Yes, pastors actively discuss, specific info	Not taught from the pulpit
4	Yes, a female pastor from pulpit, none of the prior male pastors	Yes (same church as husband)
5	Not taught from the pulpit	Yes, but a vague overall message about what men should not do, "So if you operate amidst these guidelines, there is no domestic violence."
6	"Domestic violence, yes. Mostly when something happen. Something big takes place, you'd hear, like one Sunday or two Sundays, after that you don't hear it no more."	Not taught from the pulpit
7	Not taught from pulpit (attends irregularly)	Don't know, but not in recent memory
8	Yes, taught from pulpit, "we did more things in reference to it outside of the pulpit."	Yes from the pulpit, about twice a year, "the info is weaved into broader sermons."

*Examples of IPV information couples learned from the pulpit..*

Boaz: Let's see, domestic violence—that the person that is being abused should seek help immediately. Don't wait for, "OK it's the first time, it's not gonna happen again." They should seek help.

I       Where should they go for help? What do they talk about it in terms of where they should go?

Boaz   Well they should go first seek help with the Lord, and seek help from the pastor or the church-going family.

Ruth: [Pastor will] talk and he'll talk about people who come in for counseling and they don't want to hear anything you have to say, so, I don't know how you deal with that if they're going for counseling and they're there, and then they [reject] help about how to deal with it.

Jake:   Right. The senior pastor is male and the youth minister is male, don't miss the opportunity to talk about it. And talk about what the origins are, and why it's against what your faith says it should be. Talk about your actions and how it's just so easy to walk away. You might not think it is, but if you're walking away, and she's clinging on you. You know. You can just walk her right out on to the street with you and just continue to walk away, stuff like that; talked about the root cause in terms of anger being a secondary condition and how your pain and pressure and the other things that lead to your anger need to be addressed before you take out your anger in violence.

Sena:   Not putting your hands on the female, and it's not just physical abuse either. It is mental abuse that you can do to not only your wife but your kids and the importance of speaking the

words and the words that come out of your mouth and the importance of that. I've definitely heard that from the pulpit.

More couples were able to identify definitively that their clergy discussed general strategies for couple to resolve marital discord (Table 6). This information however, tended to be in couched in sermons on topics related to marriage and the family in general, so the listeners would be expected to dissect the sermon information. Partners in two couples identified the kind of information they get in such sermons:

**Table 6: What couples hear – resolving discord**

What couples hear: Pulpit teachings on resolving marital discord

	<b>Husband</b>	<b>Wife</b>
1	Yes, often	Yes
2	Don't remember	Yes
3	Yes	No
4	Yes, but not often	Not from the pulpit
5	Possibly, but can't say for sure	Yes, "husbands, wives, study your mate."
6	Yes, on a regular basis	Long series some years ago (from pulpit)
7	All the time	All the time
8	Yes, elements in different sermons	Yes

### **Commentary on Methods**

After conducting the pilot interviews, I noticed that the way a question is phrased would affect the quality of the answer; from being one word/sentence, to being more thoughtful. As a result I modified the language to get at the issues. The pilot couple provided feedback stating that my asking about race-ethnicity was good and got to the experiences of the couples as African-descended. I realized that this topic is in the questionnaire and wasn't specifically in the interview, but was important to understanding their experiences of marital stress and relational discord and the role of faith in addressing both. In order to triangulate the data better, I needed to have it in the main interview as well. I added it through probes. I also wondered if the way I phrased the questions fit the participants' frames of reference regarding class and ethnicity; do I have the same in-group reference points. I am an immigrant and have acclimated to American culture but wondered how that might affect my connection to the participants.

It turned out my concerns about not connecting to my participant-partners were unsupported. There were moments that were both formal and somewhat detached, and of being connected. The somewhat detached moments tended to occur early in the interviews as we were establishing rapport. As we settled into the interviews, there would be moments of poignant and intimate honesty, even if it was someone sitting with uncertainty as he or she searched for the words to describe an experience. At times my questions encouraged a participant to notice details of an experience that may otherwise have been routine. Sometimes that noticing was the outcome of my commenting on my observations. That process would be akin to the physical process of the eye being accustomed to an unmoving object near the edge of the vision field. As long as the eye is focused elsewhere and the object remains unnoticed, the object seems to disappear at some point. Moving the object at such a moment increases awareness of it being in

one's field of vision and stimulates the sensation of 'seeing' it. In my observer/participant role I also facilitated or invited the partners to verify the sacred moments that emerged periodically out of our conversations as they testified and I witnessed. Those connected conversations validated knowledge, as previously discussed regarding Womanist epistemology.

A collaborative dynamic developed once rapport and trust were established, which contributes to the rigor of this study. Participants shared reflections they felt comfortable sharing. Sharing their private reflections and meanings was both an honor and a humbling experience. I believe that as the participants realized that I was being neither "nosey" nor detached from their tender moments, it built an environment of mutual trust in which I was allowed to explore with them the role of faith in their marriage. My commentary on these observations in combination with the participants' contributions toward understanding the experience made the work a somewhat co-creative process. The knowledge generated was not something imposed by the researcher, but something created in community, with the data provided by the participant as they shared their thoughts and experiences. The connection that emerged from this relationship is the space wherein the knowledge generated by this study also emerged. Knowledge generated through connection; a Womanist process.

There is one area of analysis in which I found the exercise of bracketing out my own experiences, biases and assumptions, which is setting them aside, to be most useful. It was in examining the comments from Rach regarding what she learned from the church mothers when she was younger. Rach spoke about a Womanist process that she experienced in the church when she was a young girl and characterized the process she identified as being Womanist in nature. I found bracketing here to be transformative for me. I was challenged in letting go of

my own assumptions and remembered the words of poet activist Donna Kate Rushin in this excerpt of "*The Bridge Poem*," (1983, p. xxi):

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood  
Your manhood  
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to  
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self  
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick  
Of having to remind you  
To breathe  
Before you suffocate your own fool self

Forget it  
Stretch or drown  
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power

Through setting aside my own assumptions and biases, I was able to understand and discuss the womanist reality that Rach identified; understand her ideas from her perspective.

### **Commentary on Voices and Results**

#### **Research Question 1: How do the partners talk about collective sacred process?**

The couples all testified as to the importance of religion and spirituality in their lives. Religion and spirituality do not hold a mystical or holy philosophy alone, but can also be represented through the couples' actions and tools. In addition, the data shows that God is acknowledged as both Spirit and Person. All of these elements are interactional within the individual and between the partners and contributes to their dyadic process. At the same time there are aspects of the couples' faith processes that only manifest as a result of their interaction. For example, two of the couples talk about their faith walk as a journey. When that journey is tested by adversity their dyadic process becomes more defined. The affects of adversity is described by five couples of which Sena provides a testimony, and the primary language used to describe their bond is that of their faith.

#### **Research Question 2: How pervasive is this application of 'the sacred' for them individually and dyadically, notably for the well-being and stress of their relationship?**

The couples applied their faith to all areas of their lives, identifying how the mandates of their belief influenced their actions in the different areas. They discussed not just arenas of action but the impact of faith on the various aspects of their emotional lives. For example, the couples discussed the ways in which they noticed their dyadic spiritual processes prior to any increase in their stress levels. They were able to interact protectively and defenselessly; examples are Isak and Boaz found in Theme 3 of Research Question 2. When relational discord increased, the couples argued verbally, and they also shut-down. Silence has a place in the



relationships at all times and is not relegated to times of discord. When a couple was experiencing peaceful moments, their dyadic silence was discussed by the couples as a kind of language. When discord increases, silence serves the role of diffusing relational tensions. Though used in the Bible, silence cannot be claimed to be specifically faith-based.

The complementary strategy of ‘chasing,’ or the pursuit of one partner by the other to resolve RD, may have a Biblical mandate though. Two participants mentioned the New Testament scripture of not letting the sun go down on your anger as the reason they did not let silence motivated by anger remain for long periods. Another participant referred to the scripture that if one person had a disagreement with another, the person had to go and attempt to resolve the matter. There did not seem to be any particular timeframe for when chasing would be initiated once shutting-down had occurred. These strategies represent one of the ways couples blended general and faith-based strategies when they experienced relational discord. All the couples described moments of relational discord, but their gendered dynamics did not become combative, even if there was some history of common couple violence.

**Research Question 3: What aspects of the partners’ mutual religious/spiritual interactions are functionally employed by the couples to address their relational discord?**

The couples recognized the power of God in their lives and yet some individual partners also described struggling with what it meant to fully give all control to God. In the relationship, God is triangulated as another partner in the relationship. This formed the marital triad discussed by six couples. The repeated biblical reference that defined this understanding is from Ecclesiastes chapter 4, that a cord of three strands is not easily broken. The strength of the human partners is increased because God was included. Though God was incorporated into the

family, God retains the position of being all powerful. The struggles to completely trust God have Biblical precedent, for example Moses' conversation with God at the burning bush. Struggle, then, is part of the faith process. To actively engage God as part of their relationship, the couples prayed, read their bibles and engaged in other faith related activities individually and together. God was also thus engaged when the partners attempted to resolve relational discord. Directly approaching God was the one of the means of resolving relational discord. Another was for the couple to reach out to others, primarily their church leaders, but they would also speak to friends and clinical counselors. Again, there was a blend of using general and faith-based strategies. There was a desired emphasis to use faith-based strategies, and when relational tensions increased the struggles to remain strictly faith-based also increased.

### **Revisiting the Research Contexts**

In this segment of the commentary, the issues of race and gender will be blended. This is because race plays a role in the lives of the couples and this is compounded by gender oppression. The impact of race is exemplified in the seeming contradictions in the qualitative and quantitative data. When the beneficial impacts of both faith and compartmentalization of racial assaults are factored in to interpreting racial-ethnic data collectively, the results no longer seem contradictory. Racial-ethnic issues are compounded by the oppressions of gender exemplified by the commentary of Jake regarding men who do so, resorting to partner violence, because they have been seen as needing guiding support from their wives in a way that seems to be specific to the African American community. This was stated by Jake as ultimately being a contributing factor for domestic violence in the African American community: "That's not your job, in making up a man. ... It would seem to be a handicap with regards to what you're

expecting. ... It becomes a nonverbal assumption...[and when] you actually slip up and say, 'I'm trying to make you better,' pop! That's when domestic violence comes in."

The topic of domestic violence was mentioned by two other participants where two other factors that contribute to intimate partner violence were identified. The first emerged from the follow-up conversation between Rach and Isak who discussed the rift created when one partner develops a faith-related way of life not shared by the other. Dave identified the second factor as being inadequate development of emotional language and emotional self-expression in African American men: "What I've found—and I'm very strongly in men's ministry...what I find, with Black men especially, they don't know how to express themselves. ... I see [an] inability of men to communicate clearly what they're feeling."

While the actions and teachings of the community mothers identified by the three participants are beneficial when viewed from a Womanist lens, our community still struggles with the patriarchal overlays of sexism. Those overlays are in the men and also in the women and can result in the church mother's advocacy being interpreted as damaging. This was evidenced in my queries to Rach about the advice of the church mothers. A patriarchal interpretation of the church mother's actions would categorize them as damaging and attaching fault to women as Isak indicates, "women are at fault too for thinking their men are construction projects that 'he's just not getting it and I'm getting frustrated and I don't want to deal with this anymore'."

A Womanist analysis suggests that such an interpretation may not solely be the case. The messages of the biological mothers are discussed by Isak and Jake and the messages of the community mothers are discussed by Rach. They reveal the valued and undervalued contributions of these women in the African American community which may affect gender

dynamics. Their advocacies present both a corrective challenge in the lives of the men who have adopted errant ways, and a resistance to gender oppression. The resistance to oppression manifests in the church mothers' assertion of the power of women to 'make a man.' Also, if the man has adopted ways that reduce his efficacy as a responsible African American man, the older and wiser mother would view his diminished performance as resulting from one who had forgotten his mother's tutelage. Doing so would be considered stupid. The advocacy of the church mothers is a loving, corrective and simultaneously confrontational act and is the heart of Womanist process.

Three of the participant men identify factors contributing to relationships that are not healthy, and complementary testimony is provided by a woman participant. The factors of men's poor emotional expression and negative perceptions about gender dynamics, are not present in the relationships of any of these participants. All were contacted to participate by an observant leader in their churches who considered their relationships healthy. They were included subsequent to their passing the screening instrument. The triangulated mixed-method data support the assessment of them having thriving relationships. Gottman identified similar findings for healthy marriages:

[T]here are no gender differences in emotional expression: men are as likely to share their most intimate emotions as women. Surprisingly, in happy marriages, men are more likely to reveal personal information about themselves dissatisfaction with the self, hurts, dreams, aspirations, reminiscences than their wives. And when these men are angry, they don't stonewall, but openly let their wives know what they are feeling which, again, is much less stressful for their wives than stubborn withdrawal. (Gottman, 1994, para. 35)

Though the couples did have moments of relational discord, the data showed both partners in each pairing consistently worked to protect and strengthen their marriage. They draw upon their affection and respect for each other and heavily incorporate their faith for motivation and strategies. The men in this sample didn't have persistently negative perceptions of their wives' opinions of them as men and husbands. In other words, they may have had their moments, but generally didn't believe their wives saw them as construction projects. The respect of the wives by their husbands was evident. In fact, Dave provides an example of how he values his wife's opinions and actively seeks them. His comments are an example of how the men in this study readily displayed emotional expression and emotional maturity. The spiritual maturity of the men matched or approached the levels shown by their wives, which is reflected both in their conversations and in their results on the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale and the Spiritual Well Being Scale. The tendency to use Religious Problem Solving strategies of collaborating with God and/or deferring to God's Will was higher for four of the men than for their wives. Jose provides an example of the spiritual maturity present among the men in this study.

Dave: I just can't understand why men who have a great marriage would like to just still mess around behind their wives backs; just can't understand that. ... I listen to my wife. ... I ask her opinion and actually, she corrects me...and instead of me going down this path, I'll go [differently]. I'll take her opinion because she's the one who has the most sensible thoughts about or will be more sensible about what I'm trying to do.... Being married and at the same time a Christian, number one you're committed to each other by marriage and by your vows, and also you're committed to Christ. So that makes a difference; you can't walk away. You would say things when you're not married and just living together because you know you can walk

away! ... You have to be committed, and it's compromise...it's give and take, understanding and trust. You have to have all of those mixed in together and if you don't have all of that, you'll have problems.

Jose: [My faith is] what obviously gets me through the tough times, but also allows me to appreciate the good things that happen in life. You know, whether or not we can see God in the physical from the day to day, isn't really the point. It's the point that the Spirit is with us, and that's what walks with us every single day; and that comes from Him, or Her, or, you know. ... [I]t's a beacon of light in terms of where we're striving to be, because we can never be perfect. We understand that. We'll always have sin in some way shape or form. But the whole purpose for us as Christians is to try to admit to those sins, but to strive day in and day out to be better people walking in Christ's footsteps. And so we try to do that in our relations with one another as husband and wife and the future that we see for one another, and even what we hope in the afterlife to be.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Application of this knowledge to others**

The knowledge and values identified in this study, inherent in the experiences of these couples, is transferable only to very similar populations with careful attention to population diversity. Transferability refers to the applicability of knowledge generated through qualitative research to other populations. Generalizability refers to applicability of quantitatively derived knowledge. The people who took part in this study are primarily devout Protestant Christian African Americans who are active in their churches. As similarities between this sample

population and a different comparison group decrease, the transferability of this research knowledge may also decrease. Clinicians can incorporate the knowledge generated in this study in their assessments of faith-oriented couples who contact them for services.

### **Comprehensive use of belief on multiple levels (Research Question 1)**

First, clinicians should initially assess the presence of an active belief system in the couple and identify its symbols. This is not a common tendency in secular practice. Second, it is important to learn whether the belief system is active for one or both partners. This initial assessment should also include the clinician's understanding of how completely the couple applies their religion/spirituality in all areas of their lives. In a study with African American clergy, one of the ministers observed the tendency of couples in unhealthy relationships to compartmentalize their faith. "They will make no references to Jesus Christ or spirituality at all until you bring it up," (Pastor D, as quoted by Dyer, 2010, p. 39), and mentioning faith triggers the partners to make a noticeable effort to shift their focus in order to include their faith in the discussion. The couples in this study discussed their experiences of God and the sacred as being in all areas of their lives individually and collectively. Their pursuit of God had active and receptive manifestations. Assessing the extent to which these elements are part of the total experience of devout Protestant Christian African American couples will provide information about the health of their relationships.

### **Use of faith as mediator of stress and discord (Research Question 2)**

The benefit of faith in the lives of those who took part in this study is evident through its role in stress reduction and in resolving relational discord. In this study, the couples talked about their faith practices, i.e. reading the bible and prayer, as strategies to seek guidance, and to reduce or eliminate stress that can contribute to relational discord. The partners engaged in their

practices both individually and collectively. They discussed the difficulty of actively bringing faith processes into tense moments where one or both might shut down. Nonetheless, they indicated that even in difficult moments, the partners were still motivated by their faith to end any stalemates caused by silence. Assessing the shifts that the couple experiences in actively incorporating their faith and how it is used when tensions rise, also provides information about the health of the relationship. An active faith process may also mitigate the negative effects on their relationship of their individual and collective experiences of racial-ethnic aggressions. Therefore, the clinician should also assess the interaction of faith and race-ethnicity.

### **Presence and function of marital triad (Research Question 3)**

Couples in this study included God in the marriage. As a result, the couples formed a triad with God. Considering these couples are healthy, it is possible that part of the health of the relationship results from the presence of this unique marital structure. God was recognized by the partners as being Spirit, but also referred to as a person. This personification of God is part of their belief system and therefore it is a normal conversational reference. Here, it is important to not just identify the presence of a marital triad, but also its function. In healthy relationships God-triangulated serves the role of “Way-maker,” Advisor/Sage, Sounding Board, Friend, Confidant and so on. A triangulated God relieves pressure but also leaves room for the human partners to act responsibly toward resolution of their concerns. Acknowledging the marital triad and its function in the relationship may facilitate creative use of externalizing clinical interventions. Using their faith as a mechanism to relieve stress and discord did not stem from unwillingness to engage the issues that caused the stress or conflict, but rather becomes a means to ease tensions so various possible resolutions could be identified.



### **Cultural competence**

Cultural competence regarding faith-oriented couples means that clinicians should understand the basic tenets of the couples' belief system enough to assess if they are being appropriately applied. Moreover, the clinician then needs to know if the tenets support a healthy relationship. The clinician doesn't need to become an expert on the particular tradition of the couple. However, it is important to be able to understand what a couple is discussing and whether it aligns well with the best practices of that tradition. Here the focus in competence is for the clinician to supplement her knowledge as needed to work with the couple. For example, the couples discussed scripture use in the data for Research Questions 2 & 3. One motivation for resolving conflict identified in the data was forgiveness. Another motivation was that of taking responsibility to resolve differences, based on a passage in the Book of Matthew mandating that course of action. Between these two aspects of their faith, partners are not free to hold grudges, they may have disputes, but they are expected to resolve them, and quickly based on a passage in the Book of Ephesians.

Cultural competency also applies to the underlying assumptions of the practitioner and competent practice must unfold on several levels. It has to be actively on-going, and has to infiltrate the processes within the clinician to the level of challenging embedded dominant culture values and rules that manifest when interpreting the experiences of members of non-dominant racial-ethnic groups. When it does not, the value ultimately being promulgated is, 'all work with clients must occur from the clinician's embedded dominant cultural lens and values, and any resulting hidden biases.' Those frameworks often remain uncontested, regardless of the racial-ethnic identity of the clinician. It is important for clinicians to pay attention to both sets of

cultural paradigms and rules present in the clinical process, those of the client and those of the clinician. Clinicians intent on providing culturally competent interventions need to challenge their own dominant-culture rules for meaning making when they assess behavior and motivations of individuals, and consider the underlying values and cultural rules supporting them, when it comes to persons from non-dominant people groups. Education and professional training are embedded with the frameworks of the dominant culture including values for deciding what is beneficial or harmful, and who holds power. African Americans have persistent ways of making meaning of their experiences that do not reflect the rules of the dominant culture.

Practice should not just create changes in the recipients of the interventions, but should also generate change and transformation in the practitioner. Let me use myself as an example. I became aware of how deep and subtle were the patriarchal frameworks embedded in my personal world view. Those filters initially resulted in interpretations congruent with the inherent devaluations present in dominant culture, when assessing African American cultural experiences. However my connection to the participants, recognizing here the Womanist value of connection, influenced me to reassess the dominant culture positions affecting my judgments and transformed them. That transformation in turn, will influence my future practice with African Americans.

### **Implications for Theory**

All of the knowledge generated in this study emerges through a Womanist analytical framework. The couples discuss the importance of faith in their lives and how their faith manifests interactively. Understanding was generated about their dyadic religious/spiritual practices before, during and after relational discord, as well and about the changes in their faith

processes when tensions increase. Finally, the ways faith functions for these couples in order for them to resolve any discord is now more clearly identified. Therefore, Womanist theory appears useful for assessing dyadic process in couples. Moreover, this theory values faith and so is useful for investigating religious/spiritual processes in Protestant Christians. It provides a perspective that accounts for the intersection and multiplied effects of race/ethnicity & gender as well as faith and aligns well with the cultural strengths of this population.

The apparent racial-ethnic divide in the use of Womanist theory could be applied to its relatively recent advent into the theoretical world. As such, time might be a factor regarding the broad use of this theory, and new theories tend initially to be used mainly by members of the group from which it is generated. However, other Afro-centric theoretical models have existed almost as long as there have been African American researchers; yet the racial-ethnic divide still exists. Generally Feminist theory addresses sexism in the dominant-culture and accounts for women's ways of being. However even among those trained to think with this sensitized perspective, there remains the continual struggle to overcome internalized sexist thinking. It is part of the socialization of men and women. In like manner, African Americans struggle against internalized racism as well as internalized sexism, to name two of the issues affecting this racial-ethnic group. A theory responsive to these and other issues simultaneously affecting African Americans seems the best tool to analyze and interpret the experiences of and meaning making within this group. Full consideration of utilizing Womanist epistemology and its emergent methodology should be given to any practice or research in the African American community. Utilizing Womanist theory in work with African Americans is strengths-based, culturally appropriate and upholds the values and principles of the social work code of ethics.

### **Future Research**

This study needs to be replicated in other geographic areas to identify possible regional differences. Additionally, replications should encompass different sample configurations including:

- One partner not religious or spiritual. In this sample one person did not subscribe to traditional religion but did maintain a spiritual belief.
- Both partners adhere to different denominations (religiously heterogamous rather than homogamous couples) within the same faith tradition
- One partner is not Christian
- Both partners are practitioners of other faith traditions
- One or both partners are nominal practitioners of their faith

In this way, the transferability of the knowledge generated can be confirmed and expanded. Furthermore, intervention research should be developed to assess whether work done by clinicians that incorporates multi-layered faith assessments results in the development of interventions that increase couples response to and participation in treatment. This research will in time provide evidence to support the development of an assessment tool that facilitates regular and effective assessment of the function of the marital triad in the relationships of faith-oriented couples.

Another issue that emerged for future research involved the triangulation of God, present in six of the eight couples, to form marital triads. The data identifies an opportunity for translational research. A future study would be to investigate the development of effective couple interventions that incorporate the function of marital triads for the prevention of intimate partner violence. On the topic of domestic violence, Rach suggested the possibility of

investigating the partner issues generated when the wife is committed to her faith and church attendance, and her husband is not. Additionally, the confounding data –regarding racial/ethnic stress should be investigated for its impact on marital stress. Another question is how this type of stress is managed when it is registered by an individual. For example, some participants discussed that in various ways they compartmentalized that type of stress and some discussed the role of faith in managing racial-ethnic stresses. A third possible research question in regard to this portion of the data was whether racial-ethnic stress is managed or rationalized.

Other topics for research include the additional ideas that follow. Understanding what couples don't say, similar to the discussion about negative spaces by Kerry Daly (2003). Two of the couples discussed physical intimacy, one discussed the relationship between faith and their intimacy but this topic was not explored further and would benefit from future research. What couples learn from their churches regarding strategies for resolving their discord and regarding domestic violence should also be researched. The data revealed that the couples were not getting information consistently or effectively. Research from Dyer (2010) found that clergy were ambivalent about discussing partner violence from the pulpit, while at the same time they acknowledge that information from clergy was most powerfully received by the members of the congregation. Future research should explore what informational content, preached at what frequency from the pulpit, is most beneficial for the healthy resolution of relational discord and/or prevention of partner violence.

### **Limitations**

Womanist research methods are still underdeveloped as this is an emergent approach to research (Littlefield, 2003). Currently, research methods are drawn predominantly from

ethnographic research (J. Y. Taylor, 2005; Thomas, 1998). I used phenomenological techniques from research because they best suited the research questions and also suited Womanist methodology. Both ethnographic and phenomenological research techniques tend to use a single or very few questions to generate data; I used a semi-structured interview guide for consistent coverage of particular topics (Cohen, et al., 2000; J. Y. Taylor, 1998). Future research using Womanist methodology would benefit from methods specifically identified with a Womanist process, whereas Womanist research is identified by the analysis only and not coupled with a Womanist research method. Moreover, researchers such as Janette Y. Taylor have begun to shape a specifically Womanist structure of presenting and discussing research, but the methods are currently pulled from various schools of qualitative research. Other limitations in this study include the fact that I developed greater facility in engaging couples in the later follow up interviews than the earlier ones, as such I have richer follow-up data from some couples than others. Additionally, I believe after having seen the data results that I could have spent more time exploring the function of the marital triad in the relationship. Prior to obtaining data I thought that it would be important to have both partners in the couples attend the same church, however, the data content showed consistency across all couples on similar topics whether they attended the same or different churches. Also, this research does not explore the extent to which religion and spirituality influences the broader population or the dyadic process of couples who are nominal practitioners of their faith.

### **Implications for Policy**

Systemically, multi-level interventions should be developed that account for the special needs of faith-oriented couples who separate because their relational discord escalated into

partner violence. Faith oriented couples require specifically attuned services to meet the needs of each partner with culturally competent services. “Having a clear understanding of the individual’s experiences and unique circumstances is needed to fully engage in assessment and planning,” (Bent-Goodley, 2007, p. 93). Moreover, we need “to accept that culture matters and that when we design programs and interventions to meet the needs of *everyone*, we do little for *anyone*,” (p. 98). Education and training of service providers prior to them entering the field is important. They need to better understand the intersections of race-ethnicity, gender and faith in ways that decrease assumptions and cultural stereotypes, and that increase knowledge of how to apply faith-sensitive interventions with the individual and with the partners.

Whereas this was not the primary thrust of the research, contextual data suggest additional policy implications. Appropriate care for faith-oriented couples can be enhanced on couple, institutional and systemic levels for African American couples, to parallel a discussion raised by Tricia Bent-Goodley (2007). Data from this research reveals couple-level ambivalence regarding help-seeking; institutional-level concerns include inconsistent, possibly ineffective education from the church which is a primary supportive institution and service access gateway in the Christian community. At the couple level, participants in this study showed ambivalence toward help-seeking which creates a barrier for them using formal support services. To address their ambivalence, we need to seek funding for increased services in faith-based organizations which will increase access to those types of services and possibly result in reduced stigma for reaching out to formal supports. At the community level, ineffective educational information at churches about faith-related strategies for couples experiencing conflict or partner violence would benefit from the policy changes in recent years toward increasing funding in faith-based organizations. A possible outcome would be that funding increases training programs at

community agencies to develop culturally sensitive interventions regarding the intersections of race-ethnicity and faith.



**Chapter 4 ---- Summary Chapter**

## **Summary**

### **Purpose**

This study is designed to investigate the dyadic faith process in devout Protestant Christian African American couples. Religion and spirituality are an important resource in the African American community, as discussed in the literature review and supported by the data for the participants of this study. Investigating faith-related issues with these participants generated findings that have relevance to the African American Christian community. Understanding the dyadic faith process in couples regarding how it functions in the relationship generally, and how it is used to address stress and relational discord may provide strategies toward the prevention of intimate partner violence.

### **Methodology**

Womanist methodology is the primary theoretical approach that guided the activities of this study. Womanist methodology includes dialogue, resistance to oppression, and examination of the multiplied effects of ethnicity, gender and class, as well as of other oppressions. It is committed to addressing issues that affect the lives of women but not to the exclusion of men. This epistemology values generation of knowledge through concrete experiences and the connectedness that emerges in conversation, testimonies, as a means of validating that knowledge.

### **Findings and discussion**

The findings present the individual and collective testimonies of the couples regarding their use of faith in their relationship dyadically. The themes identified are those that expand the knowledge of the issues reflected in the research questions. The themes emerged from the data. The couples' commitment to their faith and its processes remained predominantly unchanged

when they are stressed. The stress they experienced derived more from everyday life and their jobs than from experience of racial-ethnic aggressions. When their relational tensions increased, possibly triggering relational discord, they often employed various uses of silence and forms of separation to de-escalate. In all these stages of interactions, from peace to discord and back again, faith was an evident component of their relationship. It manifested pervasively and had active and receptive elements. The active elements included Bible reading and prayer and the receptive elements included recognition of ways their faith activity could be improved, as well as recognition of God, being greater than their circumstances, helped them find ways through difficulties. God in fact was frequently discussed as a third partner in the marriage, creating the healthy norm of a marital triad. This was one of the ways that sacred process was concretized in the relationship.

The findings showed that the participants in this study have strong healthy marriages based on the qualitative and objective data. The data suggests the possibility that in strong African American Protestant Christian marriages, faith plays an important and active role in the lives of both participants. It also seems to suggest that in such cases, racial stresses may not be intensely perceived as interfering with the relationship. Additionally, their religious and spiritual processes are integral to resolving relational discord. Spiritual maturity was evident in both partners and the men expressed strong relational commitment and emotional maturity. Moreover, the spiritual maturity of the couples contributed to their marital configuration as triadic, which includes the partners and God, rather than dyadic.

The findings also revealed some dynamics of gender politics in the African American community that could contribute to partner violence. Certain community mothers advocated for the pairing of a man with 'potential' with a 'good woman' who became a sort of mentor because

of the woman's strength. This type of advocacy was Womanist resistance to sexist oppression; however male-dominant frameworks dictated that men resist the help and correction offered by women. The result is devaluation of this form of the women's resistance to sexism. Another community cultural factor identified as contributing to domestic violence was the deficit in men's emotional language and emotional communication. The deficit resulted in the use of physical expression of frustration when words failed.

### **Implications, limitations, and future research**

It is important for clinicians to assess couples' religion and spirituality to determine to what extent it is present and active. This knowledge accompanied by understanding of the partners' unilateral and bilateral practice of their faith enables the clinician to add depth to her understanding of the health of the faith-oriented couple. Additionally in couples of faith, the functions of faith in calm and discordant moments need to be assessed. Pervasive presences of a marital triad and of faith processes in all areas of their relationship also need to be assessed. Doing so improves understanding of the health of the relationship in Christian couples. This study has implications for practice in its approach to cultural competence. Service provided by clinicians would benefit from religious/spiritual cultural competence, such as learning enough about a couple's religion and spirituality to suitably evaluate the partners' discussion and application of their beliefs.

The limitations in this study include that Womanist research methods are underdeveloped and require that techniques be borrowed from other theoretical research approaches. Moreover, some of the follow-up interviews had greater depth than others resulting in inconsistent depth across couples on some topics. However, the data did reveal several areas that would benefit from future research: replication of this study with various faith configurations of the partners in

the sample couples to expand the transferability of the knowledge generated. Future intervention research should investigate the effectiveness of the practice implications, and it would be important to investigate the expanded relevance of these findings for application to larger communities. From the contextual data, inconsistent subjective and objective report of experience of racial-ethnic stress as well as research designed to understand the community gender politics will be helpful to determine their roles in partner violence. Regardless, there is little doubt that for these couples their relationship with a personal God affects every aspect of their lives and their dyadic-triadic relationships. In the end, this was a study about couples and how their relationships with God affected every aspect of their lives and their marriages--contributing not only to relational health but also marital preservation.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Questionnaire and Screening Results

Questionnaire Results																			
Scales	DSES	RPSS	SD	D	SWBS	PSS	IRRS-B	Instntl	Indivdl	DCI	by oneself	by partner	in common	couple self eval	pos--	neg--	Screening Scores	WAST	WEB
>																		<1	<23
Couple V		C																	
Mose	mod/hi	18	11	18	hi	mod	hi	mod	mod	hi	hi	mod	mod	mod	hi	lo	0	0	20
Orah	mod/hi	21	12	20	hi	m	hi	mod	mod	hi	hi	mod	mod	hi	lo	mod	0	0	10
Boaz	hi	30	13	27	hi	mod	hi	mod	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	10
Ruth	hi	24	8	25	hi	lo	hi	mod	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	mod /lo	hi	0	0	11
Jake	hi	29	9	19	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	mod	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	10
Rach	mod	20	9	8	hi	mod	mod	0	mod	mod	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	10
Dave	mod	12	22	9	mod	mod	mod	0	lo	mod	mod	hi	mod/hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	12
Seba	hi	27	8	19	hi	lo	mod	0	mod	hi	hi	mod	mod/hi	hi	mod	lo	0	0	10
Isak	mod	23	11	23	hi	mod	mod	lo	mod	mod	mod	hi	mod	mod	mod	mod	0	0	21
Reba	mod	22	12	24	hi	lo	hi	hi	mod	hi	mod	mod	mod	mod	hi	lo	0	0	17
Adam	hi	26	6	11	hi	hi	mod	0	lo	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	10
Ava	mod	17	11	17	hi	mod	mod	0	lo	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	10
Abe	mod	27	10	17	hi	lo	hi	lo	mod	mod	hi	hi	hi	hi	mod	mod	0	0	17
Sara	mod	25	6	15	hi	mod	hi	lo	lo	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	lo	0	0	12
Jose	mod	20	13	15	hi	lo	mod	lo	lo	hi	hi	hi	mod	mod	hi	lo	0	0	10
Sena	mod	16	6	16	hi	mod	hi	lo	hi	hi	hi	hi	hi	mod	mod	mod	0	0	11

**Appendix B: Questionnaire Scoring Template, pg 1 of 2**

(For Information about the full questionnaire contact author; [unitylane@gmail.com](mailto:unitylane@gmail.com))

scale & subscales	score ranges	rank of each range	interpretation of scores
<b>DSES</b>			sense/perception of daily experience with God
Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale	16-32	high	
	32-63	moderate	
	64-94	low	
<b>RPSS-C</b>			
Religious Problem Solving Scale--Coping			
Collaborative	as is	n/a	collaborative (You and me God)
Deferred	as is	n/a	deferred (God decides)
Self Directed	as is	n/a	self directing (I decide)
<b>SWBS</b>			sense/perception of spiritual well being
Spiritual Well-being Scale	100-120	hi	
	41-99	mod	
	20-40	low	
<b>PSS</b>			sense/perception of stress
Perceived Stress Scale	31-40	hi	
	11-30	mod	
	0-10	lo	
<b>IRRS-B</b>			
Index of Race Related Stress--brief			
Cultural	0-40		sense/perception of stress on cultural level
	28-40	hi	
	14-27	mod	
	0-13	lo	
Institutional	0-24		sense/perception of stress on institutional level
	17-24	hi	
	9-16	mod	
	0-8	lo	

**Appendix B:** Questionnaire Scoring Template, pg 2 of 2

Individual	0-24		sense/perception of stress on individual level
	17-24	hi	
	9-16	mod	
	0-8	lo	
<b>DCI</b>			
Dyadic Coping Inventory			
<b>by one's self</b>	<b>0-75</b>		<b>you asking for what you need from your partner</b>
	51-75	hi	
	26-50	mod	
	0-25	lo	
<b>by partner</b>	<b>0-75</b>		<b>partner asking you for what s/he needs</b>
	51-75	hi	
	26-50	mod	
	0-25	lo	
<b>in common</b>	<b>0-25</b>		<b>mutual and interactive coping practices</b>
	17-25	hi	
	9-16	mod	
	0-8	lo	
<b>couple self eval</b>	<b>0-10</b>		<b>each evaluating quality of how you interactively deal with stress</b>
	7-10	hi	
	4-6	mod	
	0-3	lo	
<b>Positive/negative coping styles</b>			<b>tendency to use pos/neg coping strategies</b>
Positive (0-95)	64-95	hi	(as one tendency increases, other decreases)
	32-63	mod	
	0-31	lo	
Negative (0-49)	0-13	hi	(range reversed in relation to "positive")
	14-27	mod	
	28-40	lo	

**Appendix C: Concepts and Measurement, p. 1 of 3**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Formal Definition (&amp; citation)</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>	<b>Measure—qualitative</b>	<b>Measure—quantitative (scales)</b>
<b>Marriage</b>	Legally Married	Female & Male, cohabiting	N/A	Written statement (demog. ques.)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	African American	African American, Black, African-diasporic living in USA	N/A	Written statement (demog. ques.)
<b>Other demographics</b>	Age, length of marriage, number of children, education level, country of birth	Same	N/A	Written statement (demog. ques.)
<b>Beliefs &amp; Practices</b>	Protestant Christian	Practitioner by declaration, and intensity of religious belief in daily life	Verbal statement (beliefs ques.)	“Daily Spiritual Experience Scale” (DSES)  Religious Problem-Solving Scales—Collaborative (RPSS-sf)

<p><b>Intimate partner violence (IPV)</b></p> <p><b>Relational discord (RD) &amp; directionality of relational discord (RD)</b></p> <p>Unidirectional [MTF—male-to-female / FTM—female-to-male], or bi-directional [mutual expression of angry affect]</p>	<p>A public health problem that is preventable (CDC, 2006). Bent-Goodley &amp; Fowler (2006) describe it as “one person’s abusive use of power to control another,” (pg. 282). The physical violence can include punching, burns, stabbing; the sexual violence includes rape; the mental/emotional violence includes isolation, or any behavior that creates psychological terror such as destruction of personal property; and intimidation can include threat of harm (CDC, 2006; (Bent-Goodley &amp; Fowler, 2006; CDC, 2006).<u>Direction</u> of discord may be unidirectional, or bi-directional [Assumption—directionality will emerge from participant response.]</p>	<p>For the purposes of this study, “relational discord” (RD) will be investigated as a possible pre-cursor to partner violence. The concept will be defined based on participant interpretation, so study outcomes will refine this term.</p> <p>Current operational definition of this concept is behavior within the couple that may not, or not always, lead to violence, and can be described using any of the following terms: tension, frustration, anger, conflict/argument, hostility, fight (participant will identify if this is verbal or physical)</p> <p>These behaviors are considered to be part of the spectrum of those that can escalate into partner violence.</p> <p>Concept may be further refined by participant discussion.</p>	<p>Participant self-definition of RD and use of associated terms possibly including words suggested in operational definition, which may be used interchangeably by the participants.</p> <p>This concept will be investigated via questions about the overall quality of the relationship and about what issues/conversations the participant believes can result in relational discord.</p>	<p>Modified “Women’s experience with battering” scale (WEB); &amp; Modified “Women Abuse Screening Tool-short” (WAST-s)</p> <p>These two scales will be administered as a screening instrument to facilitate identification of couples who will be screened in or out of this study</p>
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<b>Relationship health</b>	Scales will assess the mental health of the individual and of the overall relationship concerning the issues of well being, general and race related stress, and dyadic coping (see below)		<p>These concepts will be investigated via pre-existing scales to provide information about</p> <p>a) individual well being will only be assessed using the scale</p> <p>b) beyond the general and race related stress assessed via the scales, qualitatively the partners will discuss issues / topics that each believes can result in RD</p>	<p>SWBS (Spiritual Well Being Scale); [Assumption—any relational discord will result in inverse correlation with scores for individual well-being.]</p> <p>“Perceived Stress Scale” (PSS); [Assumption—presence of relational discord will be directly correlated with score levels for individual stress.]</p> <p>“Index of Race-Related Stress” (IRRS)-brief version; [Race-related stress will directly correlate to score levels for perceived stress(Utsey, 1999).]</p>
<b>Dyadic process</b>	Interactions within the couple	Same	Questions will explore: a) who initiates faith practices & interviewee opinions about use of faith from the partner; b) response of the interviewee to signs of RD from partner	“Dyadic Coping Inventory” (DCI) will provide further understanding of the interactional coping in, and thus health of, the relationship

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

### **Belief and Practice**

1. What does your belief/faith system mean to you?
2. What role does faith play in your marriage?

### **Dyadic process—faith and moments of discord**

3. What, if there is any, do you believe to be your special language of spirituality with your spouse?
4. What are all the areas of your marital life, if any, that you practice or refrain from practicing your belief?

### **Marital Relationship—overall quality & discord**

5. How would you describe the quality of your relationship interactions and communication in your marriage?

### **Religious leader intervention**

6. Who would you talk to if you experience any marital discord? —why/not?
7. What messages do you hear from church leadership about handling marital discord?

LAST: Is there anything about faith and marriage that you have not said but would like to say?



**Appendix E: Screening Questions**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Codes: G— P—

1. In general, how would you describe your relationship?

- ☐ A lot of tension  
☐ Some tension  
☐ No tension

2. Do you and your partner work out arguments with:

- ☐ Great difficulty?  
☐ Some difficulty?  
☐ No difficulty?

Check one box for each question

Description of how your partner makes you feel:	Agree strongly	Agree somewhat	Agree a little	Disagree a little	Disagree somewhat	Disagree strongly
1. My spouse makes me feel unsafe even in my own home	6	5	4	3	2	1
2. I feel ashamed of the things done to me	6	5	4	3	2	1
3. I try not to rock the boat because I am afraid of what might be done	6	5	4	3	2	1
4. I feel like I am programmed to react in a certain way to my spouse	6	5	4	3	2	1
5. I feel like I am kept a prisoner	6	5	4	3	2	1
6. I am made to feel like I have no control over my life, no power, no protection	6	5	4	3	2	1
7. I hide the truth from others because I am afraid not to	6	5	4	3	2	1
8. I feel owned and controlled by my spouse	6	5	4	3	2	1
9. My spouse can scare me without laying a hand on me	6	5	4	3	2	1
10. My spouse has a look that goes straight through me	6	5	4	3	2	1

## Appendix F: Representations of traditional Christian faith & practice

p. 1 of 2

This appendix identifies excerpts from the faith statements from the Bible, a professional organization, and a social service organization. They show examples of traditional Christian worldview and practice regarding issues such as communication, general interaction, and marriage and the family.

### **Bible**

1 Corinthians chapter 7: 3-4 & 13-15

v3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.

v13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

Ephesians 5: 25

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

Colossians 3:18-19

v18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

## Appendix F: Representations of traditional Christian faith & practice

p. 2 of 2

### **North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) Belief Statement**

*(Excerpts of Tenets 1-10 representing universal belief and practice; accessed 10/22/2008, <http://www.nacsw.org/statement.html>)*

Excerpts:

#### ***Tenets emphasizing Christian beliefs:***

**1** There is one God, who created and sustains everything that exists, and who continues to be active in human history.

**3** God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, who was raised bodily from the dead to reconcile human beings to their Creator, and who has promised to return personally in judgment to complete the establishment of His kingdom.

**4** God works in and through people in the person of the Holy Spirit.

#### ***Tenets emphasizing human relationships and responsibilities:***

**9** Human beings are interdependent with each other and with their social and physical environments.

**10** Jesus Christ is Lord over all areas of life, including social, economic and political systems.

### **Focus on the Family: Mission Statement:**

*(Accessed 10/22/2008; [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx))*

*Focus on the Family* is a global organization designed to support marriages and families in the context of the Christian faith to remain strong and / or heal from unhealthful histories.

Excerpts from their Guiding Principles:

***The Preeminence of Evangelism:*** We believe that the ultimate purpose of life is to know and glorify God and to attain eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, beginning within our own families and then reaching out to a suffering humanity that needs to embrace His love and sacrifice.

***The Permanence of Marriage:*** We believe that the institution of marriage is a sacred covenant designed by God to model the love of Christ for His people and to serve both the public and private good as the basic building block of human civilization. Marriage is intended by God to be a thriving, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman enduring through trials, sickness, financial crises and emotional stresses.

## Appendix G: Letter for church lay leader

*To give to potential participants; p.1 of 2*

### ***Letter of Introduction***

**Date**

Hello,

My name is Jacqueline Dyer, and I am an African American doctoral student at Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. I need to complete a study that I designed in order to earn my degree, and my interest is to do something connected to our communities. I want to learn more about the ways African American Christian couples incorporate their faith into their relationships. To do this, I would like to have a couple of conversations with each of you. I start by speaking to both of you about this study in detail so that you can ask questions and give your consent to participate if interested.

If you are willing to meet with me to learn more about this study of Christian couples please separately complete and return the enclosed forms in the enclosed stamped envelopes. Thank you in advance if you are willing to do this. When I receive two completed forms from your same address, I will know that both of you are interested in learning more about my work. Sending the forms only means that both of you are willing to meet with me to learn more about my work and to allow me to answer your questions. You can decide at any time that you are not interested.

The benefit of your participation in this project is that knowledge will be generated which, hopefully, will be significant to understanding issues of married Christian couples. When your participation is done, you will be given a choice of gift certificates for local retail stores and restaurants as remuneration for your time.

You can also decide to contact me directly if you would like to ask questions first, and I will arrange to meet with you both at a mutually convenient place and time. My contact information is below.

Again, thank you in advance for your generous assistance.

In Christ,  
*Jacqueline Dyer*

Doctoral Student  
Boston College  
Graduate School of Social Work  
617.594.4855; [dyerja@bc.edu](mailto:dyerja@bc.edu)

## Appendix G: Letter of Introduction; Contact & Information Form

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**Letter of Introduction: Contact & Information Form** Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return one copy for each partner in envelopes provided**

Codes: G-- P--

A) My name: \_\_\_\_\_

B) My preferred phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

C) My preferred email address: \_\_\_\_\_

D) Preferred days of the week for making contacting with the both of us : \_\_\_\_\_

E) Best time of day for contacting me: Morning: \_\_\_\_\_

Afternoon: \_\_\_\_\_

Evening: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

i. Culture: \_\_\_\_\_

ii. Country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Marriage:

a) Legally married (Y\_\_\_\_ / N \_\_) ; length of time in years; \_\_\_\_

b) Is this your first marriage? (Y\_\_ / N \_\_); # times previously married; \_\_\_\_\_

# years of longest marriage \_\_\_\_\_

c) # children, if any, (indicate biological, adopted, other relation—using the underlined letters)

• \_\_\_\_\_

• \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is name of your belief/faith/denomination: \_\_\_\_\_

a. Number years as such: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Connected to a church? \_\_\_\_\_

c. # years: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Last level of school completed: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please feel free to make notations on the back if added space is needed. Thank you)

